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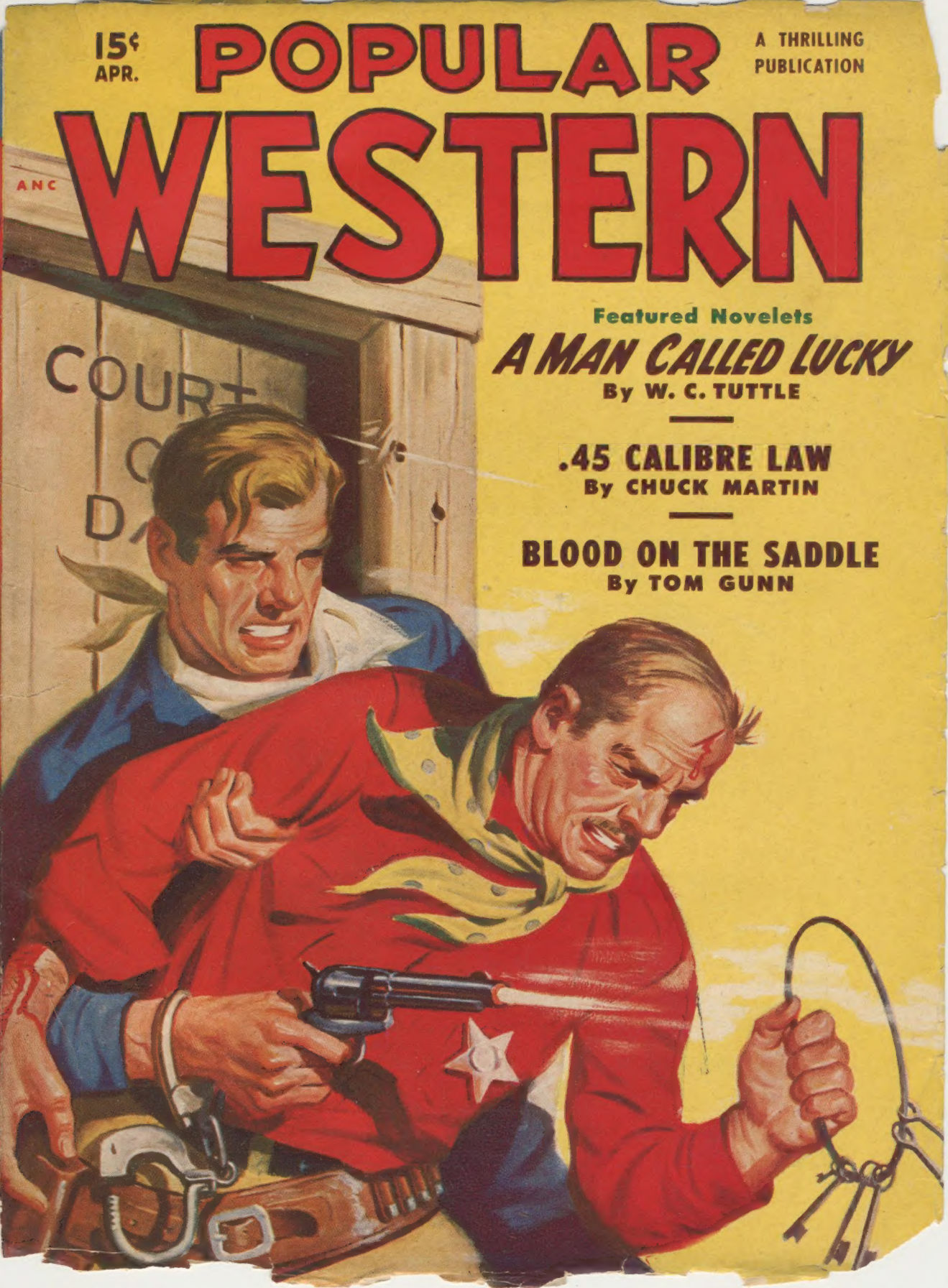

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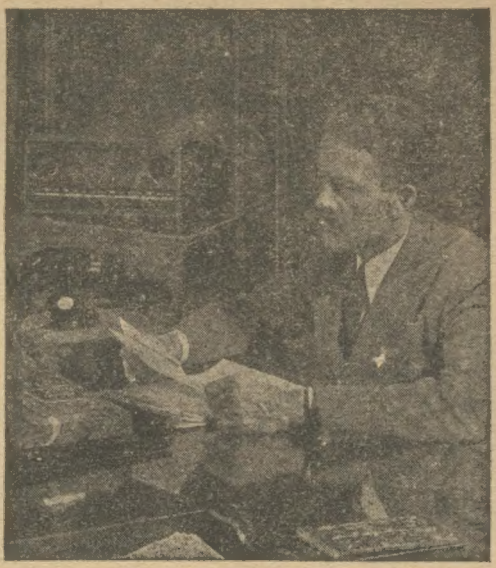

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POPULAR WESTERN

Vol. XXXVIII, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION April, 1950

Featured Complete Novelet

A MAN CALLED LUCKY

By W. C. TUTTLE

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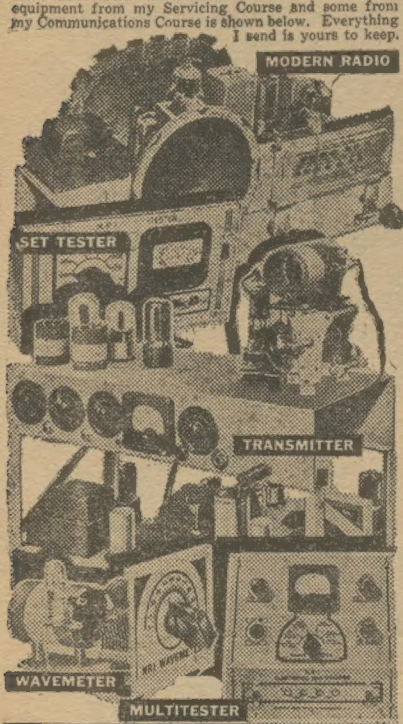

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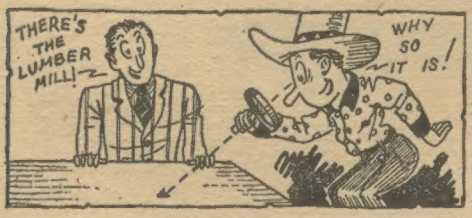
DOC LONG TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! Up at Longview, Washington, on the lower Columbia River, the Long-Bell Lumber Company operates the largest mill in the world. But the world's smallest lumber mill is at the small town of Delhi, California, between Stockton and Fresno.

I learned about this strange business awhile back when a Southern Pacific railroader showed me his collection of miniature trains.

Seems that building miniature trains is a growing hobby. And when you go to making a perfect duplicate of a giant locomotive, for instance, that's no longer than a man's arm, it takes some mighty special material as well as precise and skillful workmanship.

So, to supply these miniature hobbyist, the world's tiniest lumber mill makes and sells delicate splints that are sent by mail to its customers. They use soft, easy-to-work wood, such as cedar, sugar pine, balsa and spruce. It's milled in various shapes to fit certain definite requirements—there are W, V, U, X, L and T shapes—and "planks" down to 1/64th of an inch in thickness. Which is just about



like a healthy shaving from a carpenter's plane.

This mail order lumber mill is a busy and profitable business, handled by a couple, man and wife, and goes to show that there's no end of unusual ways to make a living—specially out West.

There's nothing unusual about the job of nursing, but a new twist in that blessed profession has developed in the orthopedic hospitals, where they treat polio-crippled children. The treatment consists mainly of exercising the patients in swimming pools, the method made famous by our late President Roosevelt at Warm Springs, Georgia.

This means that the heroic nurses have to spend hours in the water—too many hours for their own good.

News for Fishermen

So here's news for you fishermen, the ones who wade. The orthopedic nurses are buying up fishing waders! Not hip boots, but those armpit-length deepies.

This new demand has made waders hard to get in some places, but it's been a help to wading fishermen in another way. That is,

better workmanship, and more durable material is going into lightweight, rubberized, customs-made waders.

And here's some news for you hunters. Sandhill cranes aren't extinct, after all, as a good many folks claim. In Malheur County, eastern Oregon, there's a refuge where those rare waterfowl breed, nest and feed undisturbed by the rising pressure of civilization.

Your hunting experience has to date back a good while for you to remember the sandhill crane. It ranks with the swan and wild turkey as our largest game bird—although like a swan, it's protected nowadays the year around from shooters. It's the wariest of all birds—that I can tell you out of my own personal experience.

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(Continued on page 8)

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 6)

flocks of sandhills migrated in the spring and fall from the central States west. They seemed even more numerous than wild ducks and geese. Beyond doubt, there were millions of them.

Anybody who ever heard their call can never forget it, yet is hard put to describe it. It resembled the call of the trumpeter swans, also the honk of geese, but was musical like a flute, with a wide range over the scale, and carried a great distance. When the cranes were in flight, or circling an area before lighting to feed, they filled the sky with an incessant clamor that sometimes lasted for hours.

The leggy, storklike bird was at home in water or around marshes, but it was more often seen on wide prairies, because grass seed was its principal food. Geese assembled on grain stubble. But I never knew sandhills to go for cultivated ground, or for planted crops.

Acres of Birds

One day when I was goose hunting on a big wheat ranch, sandhills in vast numbers began to wheel high over a nearby sheep pasture, grown to salt grass. They reconnoitered for a long time before they spiralled gradually downward and reached the ground, with a great fluttering of their broad, powerful wings.

Presently acres were covered by the feeding birds, great bands of them that from a distance resembled the dirty-gray of range sheep.

In all my hunting experience, I had never managed to bag a sandhill crane, and had seen only one killed, by a hunting companion.

It was an immense fowl, standing nearly five feet high with its long legs and neck. It wasn't skinny, like that smaller bird, the heron. The carcass was as large as that of a full-grown turkey gobbler, and hefted around 18 pounds, guess-weight. And it made delicious eating.

So I got my neck bowed to get me a sandhill.

The next day, when they came to the salt grass pasture, I was there. I had dug a pit,

same as if hunting geese in the wheat stubble, a shoulder-wide pit in which I could completely conceal myself, by crouching a little. I'd been careful to pack away the dug dirt, leaving no sign that the ground had been disturbed around the spot.

But those cranes had eyes like microscopes. They saw the pit, and me too, I reckon, even from high above. They didn't light within a mile of my hard-dug blind, where I crouched and waited.

I took greater precautions next day. There was loose tumbleweed around. Scrooching down in the pit, I covered myself with it. I did everything but pull the hole in after me. There I huddled for hours, until I heard the sandhills coming.

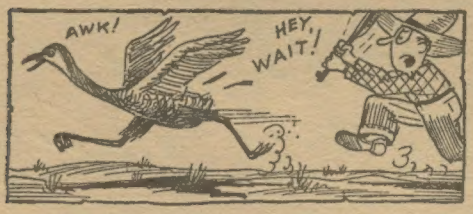
They Took Their Time

Pretty soon they were overhead, circling, calling and surveying the pasture for lurking enemies, I suppose. They sure took their time at it. I'd climbed into that pit about eight o'clock in the morning. It was along about two in the afternoon when the great birds finally settled down.

They were so near that I could hear the whisper of their wings, and hear them talking in low, warbling voices. I waited until it seemed pretty certain that a few had lit, close to my pit.

Then I reared up, brushing away excitedly at my camouflage of tumbleweed.

Mebbeso you hombres and hombresses know what onery stuff tumbleweed is. It



grabs hold of anything that it touches, and hangs on for all you can do about it.

Well, those cranes took wing with all the racket of seventeen dozen circus calliopes. There I stood, waving my gun barrel desperately, with a few bushels of tumbleweed clinging to my gun barrel.

The game was pretty well out of range before I got untangled and whammed five shots out of my old cornshucker of a pump gun. I succeeded and wing-tipped one bird. It came

(Continued on page 92)

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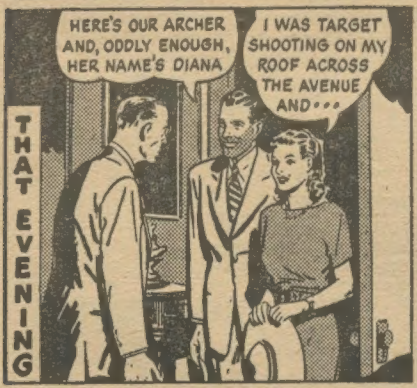
IN A LOFTY NEW YORK APARTMENT, DETECTIVE INSPECTOR JIM MOON AND A MYSTERY WRITER, H.H. KYNE, ARGUE OVER THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE LATTER'S NEWEST "WHO DONE IT" WHEN . . .

. . . AND SO, WHILE AUTHOR KYNE TRIES ARM-CHAIR DEDUCTION TO FIND THE MYSTERIOUS ARCHER, INSPECTOR MOON VISITS SPORTING GOODS STORES

THAT EVENING



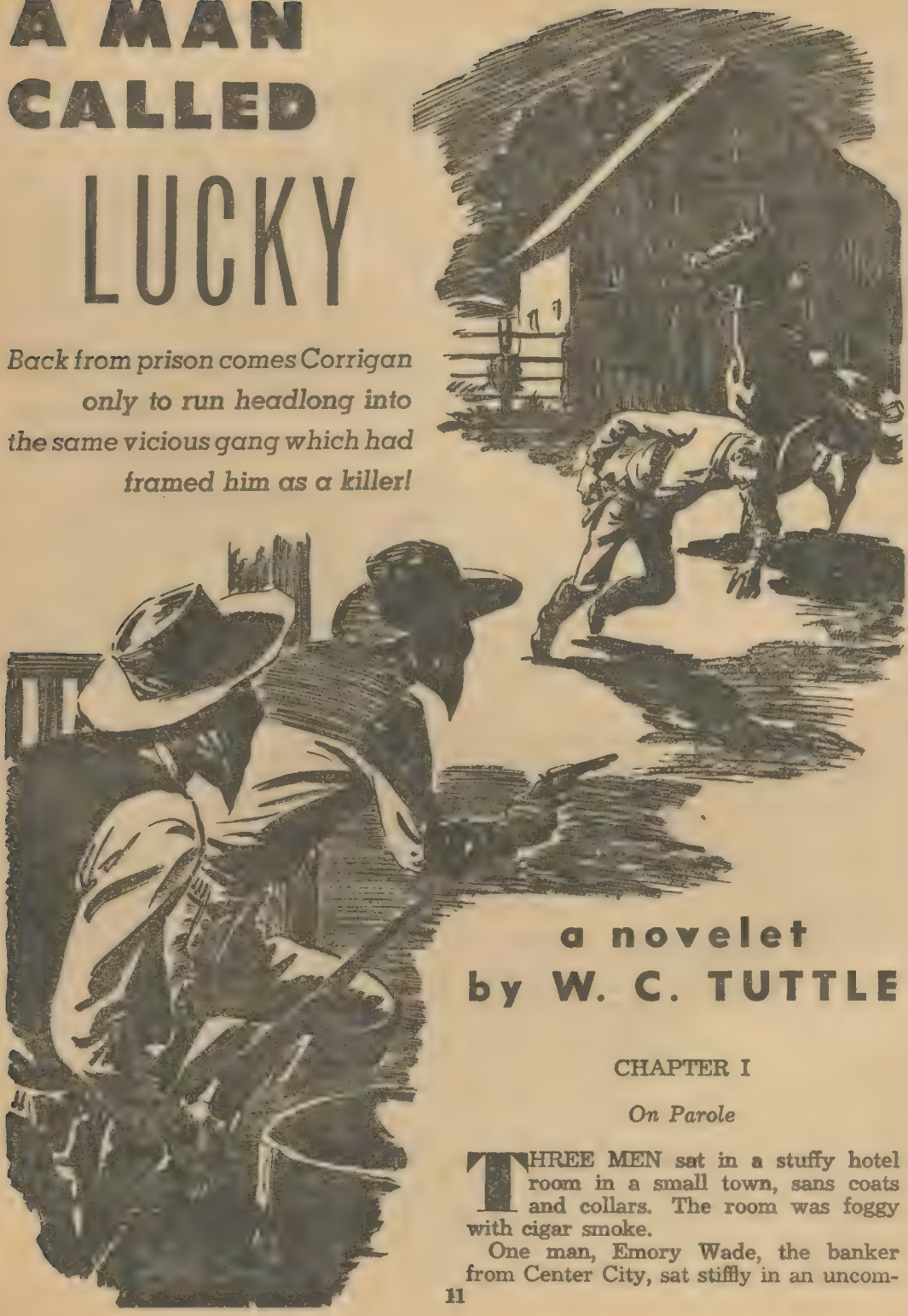
JUST IMAGINE! ME THE MAIN CHARACTER IN A REAL MYSTERY!
HE'S WONDERFUL LOOKING
YES, AND WITH A DASH OF ROMANCE, IT'LL MAKE A GOOD YARN

THIN GILLETTES GIVE YOU SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT LOOK AS GOOD AS THEY FEEL. THAT'S BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE KEENEST, SMOOTHEST-FINISHED EDGES OF ANY LOW-PRICED BLADE ON THE MARKET. WHAT'S MORE THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY AND PROTECT YOU FROM DISCOMFORT. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY 10-BLADE PACKAGE

NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

A MAN CALLED LUCKY

Back from prison comes Corrigan only to run headlong into the same vicious gang which had framed him as a killer!



a novelet by W. C. TUTTLE

CHAPTER I

On Parole

THREE MEN sat in a stuffy hotel room in a small town, sans coats and collars. The room was foggy with cigar smoke.

One man, Emory Wade, the banker from Center City, sat stiffly in an uncom-

fortable chair. Wade was a big man, grizzled, hard-faced, his eyes almost hidden under heavy brows.

Sprawled on the bed was Dan Welch, a lawyer for the express company, slender, near-sighted, peering from one man to the other, as he talked.

In an old rocker sat Frank Parker, an official of the express company. Parker was short and fat, with very little hair. He smoked jerkily and made motions with his hands, driving the smoke away.

"And that, Mr. Wade," concluded Welch, "is the situation. I have talked with the Governor several times, and he is willing to go along with us."

As becomes a banker, Emory Wade took plenty time before opening his mouth. Finally he spoke quietly.

"Suppose that Lucky Corrigan does not come back to Primivera Valley?"

"That is a possibility," replied Welch. "However, as I told you before, we have had a man planted in the prison for two months. He has been in close contact with Corrigan all that time. Corrigan is not a trusting soul, but this man is certain that Corrigan will go back there, whether as an act of bravado, to try and prove his innocence, or to dig up the loot—who knows?"

"This," remarked the banker, "is your own scheme—not mine. It may or it may not work. I presume you have already hired the two men to watch Corrigan."

"Not yet," admitted Parker. "We have reliable men to send. Have you any suggestions, Mr. Wade?"

"Not exactly," admitted the banker, "but in a situation like this, a stranger or two—let me put it this way, gentlemen. Lucky Corrigan was sentenced to twenty-five years for participation in robbery and murder. The only reason he escaped the rope or a life term was because no one could say which of the two men fired the fatal shot. Corrigan has served little more than a year. Admitting that he has been a model prisoner, Corrigan is no fool. He will be suspicious.

"Suppose he follows out your plan and comes back to Primivera Valley, as you think he will. He will be suspicious of everybody—especially strangers. Corrigan knew every man, woman and child in the valley. I suspect he still has friends, who will help him. If he hid that loot and intends to recover it no stranger will ever apprehend him. Corrigan is smart, I'll grant him that much, even if the law did get him."

"I believe you are right," admitted the lawyer. "We don't want to let the sheriff in on the deal. In fact, Mr. Wade, you are the only man in Primivera Valley who will know about it. Do you know of two men, preferably cowboys, who could be entrusted to handle this deal? I mean, of course, two residents who know Corrigan."

THE BANKER nodded. "I believe I do," he replied.

"Fine!" said Parker heartily. "That would be much better. By the way, Mr. Wade, you are not concerned about Corrigan coming back, are you?"

"Not exactly, Parker. Naturally, my testimony helped convict him, but I was under oath. I don't know how he feels toward me."

"Our man at the prison," said Welch, "doesn't feel that Corrigan is vindictive toward anyone. Of course, the only thing that might ruin our plan is for Corrigan not to come back there."

"Suppose he doesn't?" queried the banker. "Would he—that is, would anything be done. . . ."

"To put him back in prison?"

"Something like that—yes," replied the banker.

Welch smiled slowly and shook his head. "I mentioned that to the Governor, and he blew up. He said he'd be condemned if he'd do anything about it. He doesn't favor paroles and he doesn't like deals. He said the only thing he might do was cancel the parole and give Corrigan a pardon. He's a gruff old devil, our Governor, but as square and honest as a dollar."

"That statement is superfluous," growled the banker. "This is not an election year and I never voted for him, anyway. Shall we call it a day and get out of this damnable smoke?"

"Anyway," said Parker, "he is giving my company a break. With Corrigan in prison, we'd never get that money back—and a hundred thousand is a lot of dollars, Wade."

The banker yanked his tie viciously, as he peered into a fly-specked mirror. "You are overlooking the fact that Corrigan had an accomplice," he said.

"No, we are not," denied Parker. "We

LUCKY CORRIGAN

figure Corrigan was the one who cached the loot, and the other man doesn't know where he put it. Anyway, it's a chance—and we are grateful."

Tom Whelan, warden at the penitentiary, sat at his desk, scowling at some papers on his littered desk. Whelan was a big man, but not hard. He rarely raised his voice, seldom used profanity.

A guard opened the door and said quietly, "Here is Corrigan, sir."

Whelan didn't look up, merely nodded. Lucky Corrigan came in ahead of his guard and stopped in front of the warden's desk. Corrigan was three inches over six feet in height, weighing about a hundred and eighty pounds. He was not handsome, but women always gave him a second glance. He had long, gray-green eyes, rather prominent cheek-bones, a well-shaped nose and a wide mouth.

Just now he was clad in an ill-fitting suit and glaringly new shoes. The warden didn't look up, and Corrigan merely stood there waiting. Finally Whelan looked up, and their eyes met. After a moment the warden spoke.

"Here are your parole papers, Corrigan—all in order."

Lucky Corrigan said nothing for several moments. The warden poked a finger at the papers.

Lucky Corrigan said quietly, "Paroled, eh? I didn't know, Warden."

"I know you didn't, but here they are."

He picked up an envelope and handed it to Corrigan.

"Here is a hundred dollars, donated by a friend," he said.

Corrigan took the envelope and looked at the contents curiously.

"Friend, eh?" he half-whispered. "I didn't know I. . . ."

Tom Whelan carefully folded the papers and handed them to Corrigan. "Your instructions regarding reporting on your parole are included," he said.

Slowly Lucky Corrigan put the folded papers into a pocket of his new coat, a queer smile on his face.

"Warden, what's the deal?"

"Deal?" Whelan queried. "Why, I don't know of any deal, Corrigan. The Governor merely signed the—"

"Yeah, I know," said Lucky. "I saw his signature. And out of all the poor devils in this place, he picked me out for a parole—when all I did was shoot my best friend and steal a hundred thousand dollars. It's right nice of him, and I appreciate it a lot."

"You are free to go, Corrigan," said the warden quietly.

"Thank you, Warden. You've treated me fine, and if I can ever do you a favor—"

"You can—by never coming back here again."

"Thank you. I don't intend to."

"Good luck," said Whelan quietly.

Lucky Corrigan laughed shortly, turned on his heel and followed the guard.

"Did you ever hear of a man gettin'

twenty-four years off for good behavior?" he asked the guard.

The guard shook his head. They went down a graveled walk toward the main gate.

"Anything can happen, Corrigan."

"I'll be expectin' it," said Corrigan.

AS A TOWN, El Pintado was a whistle-stop on the railroad, consisting of three sand-blasted buildings, a depot and a water-tank. One building was a general store, another was a stable, and the third was a saloon, the biggest structure of the three.

Upstairs over the saloon were rooms for rent, such as they were.

Lucky Corrigan had taken one of the rooms for the night. El Pintado was forty miles from Center City. As he rode in late that afternoon he saw a small train-load of cattle pulling away from the loading-corrals. Corrigan didn't look like the same man who had stood before the warden's desk that day, two weeks ago. The hundred dollars had multiplied on a roulette-wheel and Corrigan had bought himself an outfit, discarding the one they had given him at the prison.

Just now he was wearing a black sombrero, blue silk shirt, overalls and high-heeled boots. Around his neck was a scarlet handkerchief, and around his waist was a fitted gun-belt, holding up his low-hung Colt. Before his arrest Lucky Corrigan had been reputed the best bronc-rider in the state, a top-hand with cows and a top-hand in a fight.

It was after dark when Lucky went down creaking old stairs and into the bar-room. Five men were sitting around a card table, playing draw poker. A man stood at the bar, talking with the bartender and as Lucky came into the room the man turned and looked at him. The man blinked, shoved his glass aside, and turned to stare once more at Corrigan, who grinned at him.

"Hyah, Ken?"

"Well!" the man seemed undecided. "Well, I can't . . . Lucky Corrigan? Lucky, is that really you?"

Lucky grinned and came in closer. "Yeah, it's me, Ken."

Ken Stone rubbed the back of his hand across his lips, suddenly reached out and shook hands.

"Lucky, if anybody had told me . . . how'd yuh do it?"

"Paroled," said Lucky quietly.

"Yeah. I—well, sure, why not? Paroled. I'm glad, Lucky. I . . ."

Ken Stone hesitated, staring toward the open doorway. Someone had just gone past on a horse. He jerked back, started to resume his conversation, but said nervously, "I'll see you again, pretty quick, Lucky," and went hurrying toward the rear doorway of the saloon.

The bartender said, "Can I serve you somethin'?"

Lucky smiled and shook his head. "I reckon I'm cured," he said. "I used to drink my share, but somehow . . . mebbe I'm weaned."

"You're Lucky Corrigan, eh?"

"Yeah," admitted Lucky. "I wonder what went wrong with Ken?"

"Too much whiskey, I reckon," replied the bartender. "He sold off a bunch of cows today, and he's been drinkin' enough to float a ship. Don't show it much, but I'll bet he's packin' a quart right now. Kinda acts scared, watchin' the doorway like he . . ."

From somewhere came the unmistakable sound of a shot, followed by another, spaced about two seconds apart. The men at the poker table shoved back their chairs.

"Shootin' goin' on some'ers!"

A horse and rider went galloping past the front of the saloon as Lucky and two of the men ran out. The others went through the rear entrance. No one seemed to know where the sound came from until a man called from the rear of the saloon, asking someone to bring a lantern.

Beside a little one-stall stable was Ken Stone, face down in the dirt, shot twice. He still had his gun gripped in his right hand.

"His pockets have been emptied," said Corrigan. "They're all turned inside-out."

The men stood around, wondering what to do next.

"He's dead as a door-knob, too. They must have thought he had money."

"He did have," said one of the men, who it seemed was a cattle buyer. "I paid him sixty-five hundred dollars cash today, all in currency."

"Say, this is a tough deal," said the

"That's Slim Tigard, Brad West's gunman!"

bartender. "His little kid is upstairs. Must be about eight years old."

"You mean—he had Pete with him?" asked Corrigan.

"Yeah—do you know the kid?"

Lucky didn't answer that question. He merely said, "The kid gets a pretty rotten deal out of this. We've got to tell him—one of us."

"If you know the kid. . . ." suggested the cattle-buyer.

"I know him," said Lucky, "but he probably won't remember me."

They went back into the saloon, where they met Peter Stone. The youngster was half-dressed, not over eight or nine years of age, red-headed and freckled. He seemed frightened, clinging by one hand to the arm of a saloon chair as he looked at them.

"Pete, do you remember me?" Corrigan asked.

The youngster closed one eye and squinted at Lucky Corrigan.

"Yea-a-ah," he whispered, "I 'member you. You gave me a pony."

"I'd forgotten that." said Lucky. "That's right, Pete, I gave you a painted pony and you named him Lucky—after me."

"Sure. I've still got him. That is, I did have. Where is my pa?"

The youngster's blue eyes shifted from face to face, and all except Lucky seemed to avoid that glance.

Pete said, "I heard shots and I. . . ."

Lucky Corrigan went over and put a hand on the kid's shoulder.

"You're a man now, Pete," he said. "You've growed up all to once. You've got to be a man—now, pardner. Them shots, well, they. . . ."

"You mean—they got my father?"

The question was so direct, so unexpected, that no one spoke for several moments.

"Pete, who do you mean by 'they'?" Lucky asked.

"I dunno who they are." Pete's lips were quivering. Lucky's left arm tightened around the frail shoulders. "Go ahead and cry, Pete," he said. "Get it off yore chest, pardner. Yeah, they got yore dad."

Pete cried, but not long. The men stood around, making the best of a bad situation.

One of them said, "We've got to notify the sheriff. Suppose I head for Center City. Have to git the coroner, too."

"You go ahead," said Corrigan. "We'll handle things here."

LUCKY took Pete up to their room. There were two valises, packed full.

"Pete, were you two goin' away?" Lucky asked.

"Back east some'ers," whispered Pete painfully. "Pa had some kin-folks back there—I dunno where. What'll I do now?"

Lucky sat down and considered the case.

"Yore father sold out the Lazy K, eh?"

Pete shook his head. "We just sold the cows and horses. Pa said he'd have to give up the ranch. We didn't let anybody know. Clint Heppner helped us. We threw all the cows into the north end and cut the fence and herded up here. We was goin'—"

Someone knocked on the door. "Come on in," Lucky said.

It was the cattle buyer. He sat down on the bed and lighted a cigaret.

"I'm takin' that midnight train for the east," he said.

"We was goin' on that same train," said Pete wearily.

"I know." The buyer turned to Lucky. "You're Lucky Corrigan. The bartender told me. I've read all about your troubles. Are you goin' back to Primivera Valley?"

"I am," replied Lucky. "Yuh see, me and Pete are kinda pardners now. He got a raw deal, too. I knew his mother and his father and I knew Pete when he wasn't bigger'n a potato-bug. Yeah, I think that me and Pete will go back there, kinda stickin' our noses into things. Pete's busted and I'm badly bent, but we'll make the grade, won't we, pardner?"

Pete nodded, a lump in his little throat. "Y'betcha," he managed to say. "We'll do her, pardner."

"I'm satisfied," said the buyer quietly. "Here's that sixty-five hundred dollars, Corrigan. It belongs to Pete. Ken Stone asked me to keep it until we got on that train. I'm afraid he suspected some sort of trouble."

"Yuh're willin' to trust me with that money?" queried Lucky. "Don't yuh know I just got out of the penitentiary?"

"I know you have, Corrigan. But you and Pete went pardners, before you knew he had a dime. I'm satisfied."

"So am I," said Pete.

"That," said the buyer, "makes it unanimous. Good-bye, Pete."

They shook hands soberly and there was a suspicion of a tear in the eyes of the buyer, as he turned and held out his hand to Lucky Corrigan. They shook hands soberly, and the buyer went to the door.

"All kinds of good luck to both of you," he said, and went out.

Peter looked at Lucky, and his eyes filled with tears.

"Gee, I just remembered that I ain't got no dad," he said.

"I know how you feel," said Corrigan. "I lost mine, too—a long time ago, Peter. It makes you feel awful empty. Sometimes I feel awful empty yet. But he'd want you to be big and strong. You'll have to be a man now. You've got all this money, and you've got a ranch."

Peter blinked thoughtfully. "I dunno about the ranch," he said. "Dad said he owed the bank a lot of money, and they'd take it."

"Well, maybe you can pay the bank what you owe, and still have a ranch. Peter, a while ago you said you sneaked the cows out and brought 'em here and that your father was afraid of somebody. Do you have any idea who he was afraid of?"

Peter shook his red head. "He never told me, Mr. Corrigan, but he was scared. Even here, he was afraid. That's why he made me stay up in this room."

"I see. Peter, we're pardners now so you can call me Lucky—not Mr. Corrigan. You ain't scared to go back into the valley, are yuh?"

"I ain't scared with you, Lucky," replied the kid bravely.

"That's swell, Peter. You pile into the blankets and get some sleep. The sheriff and the coroner ought to be here in the mornin' and we'll fix up everythin'. I'll run down and see if everythin' is all right."

They heard the long-drawn whistle of the locomotive as the east-bound passenger train acknowledged the red signal.

Peter said wistfully, "We was goin' away on that train—me and Pa."

"Yeah, I know," said Lucky quietly. "But look at it this way, Peter—mebbe you wouldn't like it back there—no horses, no cows, no hills to ride over. You're a cowpoke, Peter, and this is yore country."

A man came up the stairs and met Lucky at the door just as he closed it. The man was panting a little, and he drew Lucky away from the door, as he whispered huskily:

"That cattle-buyer—they got him—over by the depot. Hit him over the head! His pockets were turned inside-out, too."

Corrigan swore quietly. "What sort of a game are they playin'?" he asked. "Is the man dead?"

"Dead as a door-nail," replied the man. "We took Stone's body and put it in the back room, all covered up."

"On second thought," said Lucky, "I'll stay with the kid. They might have it in for him, too. See you later."

Lucky went back into the room. Peter had made no move to undress.

"Everything is all right, Peter," he told the youngster. "I'm kinda tired myself; so I reckon we'll both go to bed."

"I'd like that," said the boy. "I get scared—all alone."

CHAPTER II

A Broken Gun

THREE men sat in the sheriff's office at Center City. Heat-waves shimmered along the dusty street, and a cheap thermometer on the wall of the dingy office showed that it was 110° in there.

Lum Briggs, the big sheriff, wiped a sleeve across his forehead, sighed deeply. Elmer Pierce, deputy sheriff, leaned against the door-frame and spat viciously at the wooden sidewalk, while Ben Eastman, prosecuting attorney of Primivera Valley, stared dully at a dusty window.

Elmer Pierce was skinny, wry-necked, explosive of temperament, but with a streak of humor that continually annoyed the sheriff. Just now he was angry.

"They! They done this! They done that!" he snapped. "They killed Ken Stone! They killed Art Wylie! Allus

they! Who are *they*?"

"Elmer," said the sheriff placidly," take it easy. You allus want to know things—now. Solomon didn't git all his wisdom in a day."

"Nor his wives either," added the lawyer soberly.

Elmer came back and sat down, fussing with a folded cigaret-paper.

"Ken was scared of somebody," he said. "Clint Heppner helped Ken and the kid take them cows to El Pintado. He said Ken was scared stiff. Didn't want to talk about it."

"Yeah, I know," nodded the sheriff. "I talked with Clint. Ken was scared—plenty. That's why he herded his cows to El Pintado. Took two days. Cut his north fence, and took 'em out that way. The bank had a mortgage on his ranch, but not on the stock; so it wasn't no illegal move."

"But where did Art Wylie figure in on the deal?" asked Elmer. "All he done was buy the cows. Art was all right."

The sheriff took a crumpled piece of paper from his desk and carefully unfolded it. Glancing at it, he handed it to Elmer. It was smudged badly, having been printed in soft pencil on cheap paper, but the words were still legible.

YOU'VE BOUGHT YOUR LAST COWS IN PRIMIVERA VALLEY. STAY OUT.

It was unsigned, but dated. Elmer squinted thoughtfully.

"And that note," he said quietly, "was written three days before Art was murdered. Well, I'll say this much—they made good."

"If that is any satisfaction," remarked the lawyer.

"Another thing that's irkin' folks," said Elmer. "They want to know how come Lucky Corrigan got out twenty-four years early."

"They can rest easy on that," said the lawyer. "I sent a wire to the penitentiary, asking for information, and was told that it was all legal, signed by the Governor."

"I ain't complainin'," said Elmer. "Me and Lucky are friends."

"I sent a wire too, Ben," said the sheriff quietly. "I sent it to Tom Whelan. I've knowed Tom for years, and I knowed he'd tell me the truth."

"What did he say?" asked the lawyer.

The big sheriff shifted his position in his desk-chair, drew a deep breath and relaxed.

"He told me it was none of my business," he said.

"Sometimes," remarked Elmer dryly, "the truth hurts."

"Don't be smart," advised the sheriff. "What was you goin' to say, Ben?"

"I was just going to say that it cost the county a lot of money and time to convict Lucky Corrigan and they only held him one year."

"What do you care?" flared Elmer. "You proved him guilty, didn't you? The law was satisfied, wasn't it? If he got out in five minutes, it ain't no skin off your nose, is it?"

"Evidently not, Elmer. No, I don't care—I was only curious. After all, few, if any, men are paroled that soon. I mean, you've got to serve more than one-twenty-fifth of a sentence to be eligible for parole. Of course, if the Governor decides otherwise. . . ."

"There yuh are!" snapped Elmer. "We work our fingers to the bone, apprehendin' and convictin' a criminal and one man can say, you're too sweet to be in here—go and sin no more."

"What fingers did you ever work to the bone?' asked the sheriff.

"That's a figger of speech. Ever once in a while I use one."

"I'm glad to hear that you do somethin' besides settin' on the back of yore lap, complainin' about things."

"I'm val'able to this office in lotsa ways," said Elmer quickly.

"Name one," suggested the sheriff. "Just name one, Elmer."

"Don't rush me! Gimme time, will you?"

"How much time do yuh want?"

"Remember Solomon? Nobody rushed him, did they?"

"I heard," remarked the lawyer, "that Lucky Corrigan brought Ken Stone's kid back from El Pintado, and they're livin' at Ken's ranch."

"That's right," agreed the sheriff. "I didn't have much time to talk with Lucky at El Pintado, but he said he was takin' Peter home. I asked him what he intended doin' in the valley, and he said he'd give me the right answer as soon as he found it."

Elmer walked back to the doorway and

spat into the street again. Without turning his head he said:

"Just between me and you, I'll bet there'll be entrails scattered over this valley within thirty days."

"Whose entrails—as long as you've gone dudish, Elmer?" asked the sheriff.

"Theirs," replied Elmer. "The entrails of they." He went up the street.

After a while Ben Eastman said, "Lum, I just wonder if Elmer is right."

"He never has been."

"This might be his chance."

The big sheriff looked quizzically at the lawyer.

"Meanin' what, Ben?"

"Something is wrong in this valley and you know it."

The sheriff picked up his pipe, rubbed the bowl against his generous-sized nose, and began polishing the bowl in the palm of his hand.

"I—I kinda feel that there is, Ben," he admitted carefully. "It ain't anythin' yuh can put yore finger on either. Yuh take Brad West, f'r instance. He hardly comes to town any more. Used to drink a little, gamble a lot, and was real friendly. And Al Tremayne, too. Why, they've allus been friends—him and Brad—and I seen 'em meet on the street and never speak to each other. And who wrote that note to Art Wylie? It had to be somebody down here, Ben.

"Brad West hired a new cowpoke last week and if he ain't a paid gun man, I never seen one. Name's Slim Tigard. What's the answer, Ben?"

"I wish I knew, Lum. Ken Stone—maybe he knew, but I doubt it. It's a queer situation. Somethin' will have to be done toward takin' care of little Peter Stone. He's only a baby."

"That's right. Still, he's with Lucky Corrigan."

"A convicted killer."

"I know, but he's—well, I was goin' to say that he's honest—but that don't work out. You proved him guilty, Ben."

"That's true, I did. But somehow I can't help feeling that Elmer might be right."

"Well," said the sheriff dryly, "if they do start scatterin' the insides of human bein's, I hope they won't be mine."

LAZY K ranch-house was more or less of a shack, with three rooms. There was a stable and series of corrals, built in the shade of old sycamores and cottonwoods. From the ranch it was about ten miles to Center City.

Judging from the larder, Ken Stone had just pulled out, leaving everything. There was even a coffee-pot, half full of coffee, on the old stove. Lucky Corrigan could cook, which little Peter soon discovered.

The body of Ken Stone had been taken to Center City while the body of Art Wylie had been shipped to a mid-west town for burial.

Peter was still a little sick over the death of his father, but was acting very brave about it. They were going to the funeral in Center City that day. The spotted pony which Lucky had given to Peter had been turned loose and came back to the ranch.

"We sold him to Buck Cross," Peter explained "along with two others, but Buck said he wasn't worth takin' home. He won't care if I ride him."

"Buck owns the JY?" asked Corrigan.

"Sure. I like Buck."

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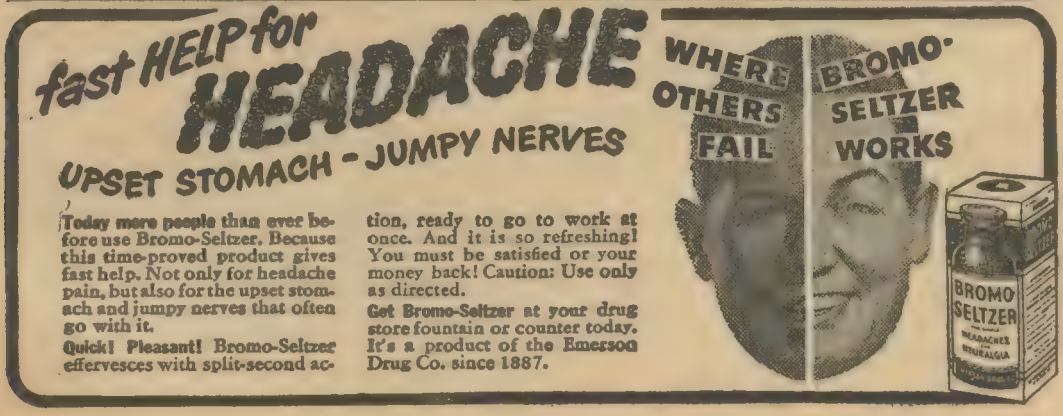
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"Peter, you've been goin' to school, haven't you?"

Peter looked up quickly and nodded. "Y'betcha I have, Lucky. Doin' all right, too. I've got the best teacher yuh ever seen."

"That's swell, Pete. Who is yore teacher?"

"Her name's May Stewart."

Lucky's eyes seemed to go blank for a moment. Peter was talking about how swell she was, and all Lucky could do was nod. May Stewart! The girl he was going to marry—the sister of the man he was accused of shooting—Ted Stewart. Ted had been cashier of the Cattlemen's Bank in Center City.

"She's teachin' next term, too," said Peter. "You must remember her."

"Yeah, I remember her, pardner," replied Lucky huskily.

Peter looked up quickly. "You ain't caught a cold, have yuh?" he asked.

"Cold. No, I—I don't reckon I have, Peter. Well, I reckon we better be headin' for town."

They went out to the horses. Corrigan picked the child up and put him into the saddle.

"You hadn't ought to do that," Peter said, "I'm able to get on by myself."

"My mistake," said Lucky gravely. "I won't do it again."

"Oh, it's all right—except that it makes me feel like a kid."

They sat on a front pew in the little church, while a sad-faced minister preached an interminable sermon. That was something to be expected, but what hit Lucky Corrigan harder than anything else was the fact that May Stewart, not twenty feet away, sang a solo. May had a beautiful voice, but Lucky didn't hear it. He just sat there, stony-faced, looking straight ahead.

There was probably not one single adult in the church who did not know the whole story. Worse than that, there was possibly not one but believed Lucky guilty.

It was a tough ordeal for Lucky Corrigan. When it was finally all over, Peter and Lucky rode back to the ranch.

Peter was curious. He realized that this was the first time Lucky had been in Center City in a long time, but no one shook hands with him, no one spoke to him. With the horses stabled, they again sat on the porch. It was cool out there, the sun down behind the hills.

"Tomorrow we'll go to the bank, pardner," Lucky said. "We've got to find out how much you owe Emory Wade and his bank."

"He didn't speak to you today," said Peter.

"He would," said Corrigan quietly, "If he knew we were going to pay him some money."

"Uh-huh," agreed Peter. "You knew Brad West, too, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah, I knew him. I reckon I knew everybody around here."

Peter screwed up his face thoughtfully. "Lucky, why didn't they—wasn't they glad to see you today?"

Corrigan shook his head.

"You're pretty young to understand things, pardner. But as long as we're pardners, you've got to know about things."

"Things?" queried the red-headed boy.

"Yeah—why folks don't shake hands with me, Peter."

"Oh."

"You see, Pete," said Lucky slowly, "over a year ago I owned the JY spread."

"Yuh mean—the one Buck Cross owns, Lucky?"

"That same one. I owed the bank a little money, and they took the ranch. Later, the bank sold it to Buck Cross. Well, anyway, the Golden Ghost, the Calumet and the Blue Cross mines were boomin', doin' a lot of improvement work, and had big payrolls. Their money for their payrolls all came in at once, one night. I reckon they had it fixed for the bank to open long enough to take over the money.

"This money was taken from the train to the bank, but before the bank had a chance to accept it, two masked men stepped in and held 'em up. Ted Stewart, cashier of the bank, made a foolish move for a gun, and got killed. In their getaway from town, one of the men lost his gun, and the sheriff found it. Do you understand all this, pardner?"

"Yeah," nodded Peter, "I know what yuh mean. That gun was yours."

"Oh, you've heard about it, eh?"

Peter nodded. "I heard pa tellin' about it."

"Well," continued Lucky, "they arrested me next day, tried me in court and sent me to jail for twenty-five years."

"Gee!" gasped Peter. "That's a long time, ain't it?"

"Yeah, it's quite a long time—I guess. Yuh see, Peter, it *was* my gun. I was packin' another one, because this one had a broken firin' pin. Somebody stole it from my house. That broken gun saved me from somethin' worse than twenty-five years. They figured I couldn't have shot Ted Stewart."

"Unless," said Peter wisely, "that man had another gun that would shoot and dropped your gun on purpose."

Lucky stared at Peter, his eyes narrowed.

"Yea-a-ah!" he breathed. "That's right. Peter, you're a pretty wise young man. Let's cook up some supper."

"I ain't so awful smart," denied Peter. "One day pa was talkin' to May Stewart, and she said—well, she said the same thing I did."

"You mean she thought maybe the man threw away my gun, so that the sheriff would find it?"

"Yeah, that's what she thought."

"You know somethin', Pete?" queried Lucky, as he put his arm around the kid. "I think you're the best pardner I ever had."

"Well, gee, I ain't changed, have I?"

"'Course you have,—you're gettin' better all the time."

CHAPTER III

Three Dead Men

EMORY WADE looked up from his desk just inside the railing which separated him from the common people, and saw Lucky Corrigan looking at him. Emory Wade had seen him at the funeral, and knew all about him being paroled.

"Howdy, Mr. Wade," Corrigan said.

Emory Wade didn't know how Lucky Corrigan felt about him, but his greeting had been cordial.

"Glad to see you back, Corrigan," he said.

"You can sweep that up with the rest of the torn playin'-cards, cigar-butts and burned matches," said Lucky quietly. "Let's me and you start out bein' honest. You ain't glad to see me, Wade."

"I try to be civil," said Wade stiffly. "If you don't care—"

"I don't. How much did Ken Stone owe the bank?"

"Ken Stone? Oh, yes. Why, I believe he—that is, we hold a mortgage for five thousand dollars on the Lazy K."

"How soon is it due?"

"Why, I—well, I'm not exactly sure. In a month or two, I believe."

"Interest paid to date?"

"Ye-e-es, I believe it is—or nearly so. But why do you—"

"Get the papers. I'm payin' it off, Wade."

"You—uh—you're paying it off?"

"Five thousand in cold cash, Wade. Get the papers."

"Well, I—this is unusual, to say the least, Corrigan. Of course, if you are serious. . . ."

"You and your bank took over my JY spread for a measly two thousand dollars, Wade. I couldn't help it. With any decent break, I'd still own it, and you'd have been paid off. Tryin' to save your life in court costs money. But I'm not kickin' —it's all right."

"Yes, yes, of course, Corrigan! The bank doesn't want the Lazy K. It isn't worth the price of the mortgage, but if you—"

"Listen, Wade, the two springs on that ranch are worth twice the price of the mortgage. They never run dry and every cowman in this country knows that. Water is life insurance, Wade, and you know it."

"Well, I—not being in the cattle business, of course, I—well, I shall get the papers."

Corrigan cooled his heels while Wade dug up the papers. Lum Briggs, the sheriff, wandered in, saw Lucky and held back until Wade came back to his desk. The sheriff saw Lucky take out a huge bundle of currency and count out fifty one hundred dollar bills on Wade's desk. Lum Briggs swallowed painfully and came in closer.

Wade watched the big bills flutter down

on his desk, and looked up at Lucky Corrigan.

"Where did you get that money?" he asked.

"That," replied Lucky, "is my business. Fifty of 'em, Wade."

Lum Briggs came in closer and watched the banker count them.

"In addition to the papers," Lucky said, "I want a receipt for five thousand dollars, made out to Peter Stone, a minor."

Wade wrote the receipt and signed it carefully.

"Does this," he asked, "happen to be the money Ken Stone got for his cows?"

"Sorry—no answer," smiled Lucky.

"What difference would that make?" asked the banker.

Lucky smiled as he replied, "Just the difference between free money and money impounded in the estate of Ken Stone."

Lucky nodded to Lum Briggs, as he walked out. Briggs went over to the railing.

"What sort of a shenanagan was he pullin'?" he asked.

The banker smiled wryly. "He paid off the mortgage on the Lazy K in the name of Peter Stone; paid it off in hundred-dollar bills, too."

"Where on earth did Lucky Corrigan get that much money?"

"He refused to say."

"Hm-m-m-m! Five thousand dollars, eh? I wonder how much Ken got for his cows in El Pintado?"

"You might ask Lucky Corrigan, Lum."

"Yeah, I might—but I won't. See yuh later, Emory."

When Lucky went to the bank he had left Peter in the general store, having a wonderful time with a bag of peanuts, but now he found the boy outside, talking with Buck Cross. Peter called to him.

"Lucky! Mr. Cross says I can keep that pony for myself!"

"That's fine," grinned Corrigan. "Howdy, Buck."

Buck Cross didn't hesitate to shake hands.

"Pete told me that you and him are pardners, Lucky."

"Yeah, we're runnin' the Lazy K. I'm glad you gave Pete the pony. Even if we ain't got no cows, we've got two horses now."

They all laughed and Buck said soberly, "Lucky, are you and Pete aimin' to build up a herd?"

"We will if we can settle our argument," said Lucky seriously. "You see, Pete wants to buy some fancy stuff and go into breeding show stuff, but I want to stick to white-faces."

"Is that right, Peter?" asked Buck soberly.

"That's right. Anythin' that Lucky says is right with me."

"Well, don't let him talk you out of that fancy stuff."

Peter grinned and dug into the sack of peanuts again.

"How's things, Buck?" asked Corrigan.

"Well—fair, Lucky. I didn't know how you'd feel about me takin' over yore old spread. I got a good deal with the bank and borrowed enough to build up the herd a little. If I hang on, I reckon I'll be doin' all right before I git too darned old to ride a horse."

"The bank had to take it," said Corrigan. "I owed 'em money. It's all right with me, Buck—it's yours."

"Thanks, Lucky. I'm glad you're back."

"Thank you, Buck. You're about the only one who is glad."

"How about me?" asked Peter. "I'm glad, y'betcha."

Lucky looked down at the kid and across at Buck.

"There are things you can't beat, Buck—not even if you've got all the aces."

"I know what you mean," nodded Buck. "See you later."

LUCKY and Peter were walking down the street toward where their horses were tied at a hitch-rack near the sheriff's office, when Al Tremayne, owner of the Forty-Five outfit, and one of his men rode in fast, dismounted at the sheriff's office and went inside. Elmer Pierce was in there, and the three of them came out on the sidewalk. Elmer called to Lucky, asking if he had seen the sheriff.

"He was at the bank a few minutes ago," replied Lucky.

The sheriff had crossed the street but heard Elmer call, and was cutting across toward the three men.

"Pardner," said Lucky, "that sounds like trouble—let's lend an ear."

It certainly was trouble. Tremayne and

his man had found the body of Tug Sims, one of Brad West's cowboys, beside the road, shot through the head. Al Tremayne seemed a little shaky, as he produced a small square of cardboard, on which was printed in pencil;

WE KEEP OUR WORD.

"It was stuck inside the collar of his shirt," said Tremayne.

Lum Briggs swore hollowly and went to saddle his horse.

Elmer said, "We keep our word, eh? What word? Wait a minute—there's Brad West! Maybe he'll know."

Brad West and Slim Tigard swung their horses away from a hitch-rack across the street and came over to them. Slim Tigard had all the ear-marks of a gun man. Brad West was rather heavy-set, with sagging jowls and bloodshot eyes. West's Circle Seven was the biggest outfit in the valley.

Strangely enough, Tremayne walked away as Elmer told West about the discovery of Tug Sims' body and recited the one line which had been printed on the card. Lucky Corrigan watched West's face, but not a line changed. West was a good poker-player. Slowly he repeated the line, and Elmer nodded.

Brad West turned his head and watched Tremayne and his man, going into a store. "Tug was a good boy," he said.

"Yeah," agreed Elmer. "Somebody must have promised him something."

The sheriff came onto the street, leading his horse. "Elmer," he said, "go and tell Doc we'll need him. Hyah, Brad."

"We'll ride out with yuh, Lum," said West quietly.

"Glad to have yuh, Brad. Awful, ain't it?"

"Sure is. We're gettin' more'n our share, seems like."

"Shore does. Ken Stone, Art Wylie and now Tug Sims. Brad, didja hear that the pockets of both Ken and Art were turned inside out?"

"They were, eh? Robbed, yuh mean?"

"I don't know about that. Ken sold out all his cows to Wylie for sixty-five hundred in cash and Ken didn't have any money on him."

Neither of the two men were paying any attention to Peter Stone and Lucky Corrigan. Elmer Pierce and the coroner came, and the four men went away together.

Lucky said, "Well, pardner, we might as well go home, I guess."

"That's right," agreed the boy. As they walked to their horses Peter said, "Lucky, do you suppose the same men killed Tug Sims?"

"Well, that's worth thinkin' about, pardner," replied Lucky. "This country is gettin' tough. They not only shoot you, but they tie notes onto you."

They brought the body of Tug Sims back to town. He had been shot through the head, and at such close-quarters that the powder burned the hair just above his left ear. The sheriff made no comments, but Elmer did.

"Tug was shot by a man he trusted, I tell yuh. He was off his horse and—"

"Why do yuh say he was off his horse?" interrupted the sheriff.

"Because there ain't no giants around here, Lum. Put Tug into a saddle and—well, look! There was two men. Don't ask me how I know. Tug was on his feet, talkin' to 'em. He was facin' one man, and the other was on his left. This feller on the left pulled his hog-leg, stuck it agin Tug's head and unhooked the trigger."

Lum said, "Shucks! What do you think, Brad?"

"Elmer could be right, Lum. It had to be done tricky, 'cause Tug wasn't anybody's fool."

"But if he wasn't lookin' for trouble, Brad—"

"We might as well go back," said Brad West. "How they did it isn't the important thing right now."

"And if they had promised to shoot Tug, he'd be on guard," added Elmer. "Doggone it, there I go. *They!* I'm gettin' so I hate that word!"

Where the road forked to the Lazy K stood a huge, very ancient cottonwood tree. The top limbs were dead, but about half-way down it was heavily leafed.

As Lucky and Peter turned off on their road, Lucky said, "Peter, did you ever hear anybody talk about that tree?"

"Yeah," replied Peter, looking back at it. "Dad told me that it was the Medicine Tree of the old Indians."

"That's right, Peter. Some of the old timers still remember when the Indians used to hang gifts there; gifts of food,

clothes, beads and all that. The white men used to steal it, and the Injuns thought that the Good Spirits took it away. The old medicine men used to say that any man who steals from the Medicine Tree, or defiles the tree, will die. Maybe they put a curse on it, I dunno."

"Maybe they cursed the top branches," said Peter soberly.

"Shore looks like it," smiled Lucky.

PETER went to bed early that evening. Corrigan searched through the old ranch-house, and on the floor of a closet, buried under some old trash, he found a small, brass box, locked. With the aid of an old screwdriver, he broke the lock.

Inside were old bills, old receipts, clippings from newspapers dealing with cattle diseases. On top of the stuff was a folded sheet of cheap paper, on which had been printed in soft pencil, now badly smudged:

YOU HAVE YOUR FIRST ORDER. WE KEEP OUR WORD. SAY NOTHING TO ANYBODY, BUT PAY ON THE DOT. EVERY CATTLEMAN IN THIS VALLEY WILL DO LIKEWISE, OR PAY A PENALTY FAR BIGGER THAN THE ASSESSMENT. REMEMBER THIS—WE KEEP OUR WORD.

"We keep our word," muttered Lucky thoughtfully. "That's what must have happened to Ken Stone—they kept their word. But what the devil is this outfit, I wonder? Assessments, eh? That means they're collectin' from every cowman in the valley—but how much and what for? By golly, this solves some of it, anyway."

He kept the paper but put the box away. As he sat down again, someone knocked quietly on the door. Corrigan picked up his gun from the table, stepped over close to the door and asked who it was.

"This is Brad West," replied a voice.

"The door's unlocked, West."

West was alone. He closed the door behind him, looked sharply at the gun as Corrigan placed it on the table and sat down without an invitation. Lucky was a bit puzzled at the visit of the biggest cowman in Primivera Valley. West relaxed and looked around.

"Kid's gone to bed?" he asked.

"Yeah, he hits the hay pretty early, West."

"Uh-huh. Corrigan, you were at El Pintado, when Ken Stone and Art Wylie were killed, I understand."

"That's right. I was in the saloon when Ken was killed outside, and I was with the kid when they told us that Wylie was killed."

"I wasn't tryin' to put the deadwood on you, Corrigan."

"Ken was my friend," declared Lucky, "but I didn't know Wylie."

"They got Ken's money, didn't they?"

"His pockets were turned inside out. So was Wylie's."

"I see. That night, Corrigan, did you see anybody from the valley?"

"Not a soul, except Ken and the boy."

After a long pause Brad West said, "They killed Tug Sims today."

"I know—I was in town when the word came. Had a tag on him, I heard. Didn't it says, 'We keep our word'?"

"You remember the exact words, Corrigan."

"I didn't have to—look at this."

Lucky handed him the letter he had found in the box. West looked it over and handed it back.

"I reckon you got one just like it, West," Corrigan suggested.

Brad West didn't say, he merely sat there, staring at the floor.

Finally he looked up. "Tug didn't do anything, they killed him as a warning to me. Ken didn't pay 'em and they murdered him. Maybe he didn't have the money, so they killed the cattle buyer and searched him."

"That could be," nodded Lucky. "What's their price, West?"

Brad West's jaw shut tightly for a moment. "Fifty percent of all sales."

"Well," remarked Lucky, "yuh can't say they're cheap."

"I sold a bunch of cows two weeks ago, Corrigan, sold 'em to Art Wylie."

"And you didn't pay the fifty percent, eh?"

"I didn't. Blast 'em, I'll fight—or will I? You've got to see what you're fighting."

"How do they collect their share?" asked Lucky.

"That's the smart angle. You make the sale, and they tell you where to leave the money. Oh, they're smart enough; you can't trap 'em on that."

"No idea who they are, West?"

"No. I've been warned to keep my

mouth shut, but I've told you. You can't be one of the gang, Corrigan. Any other man in this valley can be one of 'em. Don't you see where they've got us?"

"Where the hair's short," agreed Lucky. "What about the sheriff? Don't he know that somethin' is wrong?"

"Mebbe—I dunno. I don't dare be seen talkin' with him. This afternoon was different. But we didn't talk about anything, except the murder of Tug Sims. I don't believe Lum Briggs knows a thing about this trouble—and none of us dare tell him."

"I'll tell you something," said Corrigan. "Ken Stone left the money with Wylie. Wylie was to give him the money on the train. After Ken was killed, Wylie gave me the money. They killed him too late. Today I paid off the mortgage on this ranch."

"Good! That's one pot they can't dip into. But ain't you scared?"

"Every minute," smiled Lucky. "It pays off—bein' afraid, West."

"That's right. Listen, Corrigan—you can't live off this ranch—you and the kid. I can use you on the Circle Seven—both of you. I like the kid. Think it over, will you?"

"With my reputation, West?"

"Your reputation doesn't bother me. You know, Corrigan," West looked thoughtfully at him for several moments, "you know, you must have some mighty influential friends."

"I was a model prisoner," said Lucky soberly, "and they gave me twenty-four years off for good-behavior."

"That's what they're sayin'," remarked West. "Think it over and talk to me when you can. *Buenas noches.*"

"Wait a minute, West," said Lucky. "How many payments have you made to 'em?"

"Not one—yet—and I've lost a cowboy. See you some more."

Corrigan went to bed, but not to sleep. He realized that this gang, whoever they were, had been foiled in their attempt to take money from Ken Stone and since he had paid the mortgage on the Lazy K they would know that he got the money. Just how they might retaliate he had no idea, but there was plenty proof that they would not stop at anything.

Lucky was not worried about himself, but he didn't want any harm to come to Peter Stone.

CHAPTER IV

The Medicine Tree

LUCKY was up and dressed before daylight, but Peter was snoring peacefully. There was an old Winchester .30-30 hanging on a peg in the main room, and Lucky examined it. It needed oiling badly, and the inside of the barrel was badly fouled. Lucky cleaned it up a little. There were only three cartridges in the magazine.

Daylight was drifting across the hills as Corrigan started to put the gun aside. At that moment he heard a horse nicker. Lucky's sorrel and Peter's pinto pony were in the corral. Again came the nickering sound as Lucky peered through a window. He could barely see his horse against the corral fence, head high.

Lucky levered a shell into the barrel of the rifle, slipped quietly through the back doorway and circled back against the small front porch, where he crouched, watching. Objects were fairly distinct now and he saw the movement of a horse and rider out beyond the old stable.

The man was dismounting and he led his horse into the brush. The point of a brushy hill extended down past the stable and this man had dismounted almost at the point. Lucky relaxed, watching the hill to the left of the stable. After a long wait he saw a man, low in the brush, skirting the side of the hill, heading for a spot about half way up the point.

"You ain't crawlin' up there for no darned good," decided Lucky, half-aloud. He proceeded to notch his sights just below the crawling figure.

The whip-like blast of the .30-30 seemed magnified as the echoes rattled against the stable and the hill. Lucky saw the man dive wildly for the heavier cover, but did not shoot again. He heard Peter calling his name from inside the house, and he called back.

"Stay inside, Pete! Don't come out!"

Lucky swung the muzzle of his gun, covering the spot where the man had dismounted.

Peter called, "Who is it, Lucky?"

"It ain't a friend, or he'd yell 'King's X!'" replied Lucky.

Then he saw the man again. He was on his horse, swinging to the right, fairly buck-jumping the horse through the brush. Lucky cuddled the butt of the old rifle against his shoulder, swung the sights against a narrow opening and squeezed the trigger, as the horse and rider flashed into view.

The opening was narrow, but he saw the horse's hind-quarters going into the air, as the animal fairly turned a handspring. Then both horse and rider were out of sight in the brush. "Didja get him? Didja, Lucky?" Peter yelled.

"I got somethin'," replied Lucky. "You stay where yuh are, pardner—I'm scared I didn't get the shootin' end of the deal."

"You mean you shot his horse?" asked Peter anxiously.

"Yeah, I'm afraid I did. We'll have to find out pretty soon."

Corrigan went back into the house and hung up the rifle. Peter was anxious for details, anxious to go out there and see what they might find, but Lucky held him down.

"Wait a while, pardner. Maybe that man's on foot, I dunno—but he wasn't makin' any friendly visit. If we crowd him one of us might get salivated. He'd have all the best of it."

Lucky built a fire in the stove and put on a pot of coffee, before going down there. Even at that, they went carefully, taking no chances on a wounded man still able to work a sixshooter.

But there was no wounded man. He was gone, but his horse was still there—a black and white pinto gelding, wearing a plain, well-worn saddle and a plaited leather hackamore. On the right hip was the well-known Circle Seven of Brad West's spread.

Peter stood back, staring at the horse.

Lucky said, "Who owned that horse, Peter?"

"That's Mr. West's private horse!" gasped the boy. "He called him Magpie. He—he was trainin' him to sell to a circus."

Lucky had no comments as he hunched on his heels, rolling a smoke. Suddenly Peter ran ahead a few steps, stooped over and picked up an object. It was a pocket watch, with a short piece of chain dangling.

"I saw the sun shinin' on it," Peter said.

Lucky looked it over carefully. It was a gold-plated case, and on the back were the two initials in block letters—T.S. He read the initials to Peter, and asked him who had those initials. The boy screwed up his little face thoughtfully, but shook his head.

"How about Tug Sims?" asked Corrigan. "But maybe 'Tug' is a nickname."

"No, it ain't," denied Peter. "His name was Tugwell Sims."

"Good boy! That identifies the watch. All we'll have to do is find out who got it from Sims."

"Maybe," suggested Peter, "the man who killed him took his watch."

Lucky grinned. Peter was pretty smart for his years, at that.

"Suppose you killed a man, Peter," he said. "Would you wear his watch?"

"Well—it could have flew out of his pocket."

"Right—it could. But I think the man was wearin' the watch and when the horse turned over with him, the chain broke."

"But why would Mr. West—that's his horse, Lucky. Nobody else ever rode Magpie."

"They didn't, eh? Looks bad for Mr. West—sneakin' up on folks at daylight."

"It kinda makes yuh sick, don't it?" asked the boy soberly.

"It kinda ruins your faith in human beings," agreed Lucky. "We might as well go back and get ourselves some breakfast, pardner."

THEY went back and Corrigan was frying bacon in the kitchen when Peter came in from the main room, bringing a sealed envelope.

"What's this, Lucky?" he asked.

"I dunno," replied Lucky. "Where'd you get it?"

"Under the old rug that's right in front of the door."

Lucky tore the envelope open and drew out the single sheet of cheap paper, on which was printed:

FIFTY PERCENT OF $6500.00 IS $3250.00. YOU WILL BE TOLD WHEN AND WHERE TO LEAVE IT. WE KEEP OUR WORD.

"What does it mean, Lucky?" asked the boy anxiously.

"I'm a son-of-a-gun!" whispered Lucky. "Somebody shoved that under the door and under that old rug."

"Is it bad?" asked Peter. "The bacon's burnin'!"

Corrigan jerked the skillet off the stove, set it aside and sat down at the table.

He said, "Pardner, you've got to realize just how bad this is," and proceeded to explain as well as he could. He explained why Peter's father was killed, the reasons for the murder of Art Wylie and the murder of Tug Sims.

Peter listened, wide-eyed, understanding. He said, "That's why that man was going to bush us from the hill this morning. And they want us to pay them all that money."

"That's right, pardner—and they know blamed well we can't pay it."

"But what can we do, Lucky?"

Lucky smiled at the tense-eyed kid. "Know any prayers, pardner?"

"I know the one that goes, 'Now I lay me down to sleep.' "

"No, that one ain't appropriate. Sleeping won't help us. Oh, well, there's no use worrying on an empty stomach. How many eggs?"

Peter blinked, swallowed heavily and said, "I dunno. I ain't a bit hungry, but my stummick says I'm so empty that even three eggs wouldn't fill me."

"Three eggs comin' up," grinned Lucky. "They say that an army fights on its stomach and it kinda looks as though we've got a fight coming up. Pete, did you ever shoot a six-gun?"

The boy nodded soberly. "I shore did—once. Dad said I ought to know how to work one, and he let me shoot his gun. He put a tin can out there, between here and the corral, and we stood at the back door. I was pretty scared, but I shot it."

"Hit the can, I suppose," remarked Lucky, sliding the three eggs off on a plate.

"No, I didn't exactly hit the can. Yuh see—well, I killed my pet rooster, the bullet hit a rock and—well, yuh see, we had five or six calves in the corral, where we was goin' to brand 'em. One old mama cow was lickin' her calf through the fence, and that bullet hit the end of one of her horns, and—" Peter drew a deep breath. "She knocked down two fence posts, gettin' out of there and she never claimed that calf again. I guess she blamed the calf—I dunno."

Lucky wiped his eyes, but it wasn't from bacon-smoke.

"You didn't shoot again, eh?"

"No," replied Peter, sliding into his chair. "Pa said we'd have to get a bigger place before I took another lesson."

Corrigan didn't want to leave the ranch that day, but kept a close watch. He also kept Peter under cover, which wasn't hard to do. The boy was alert. He realized their danger.

Just to play safe and try to apprehend anyone trying to leave a note, Lucky sent Peter to bed that night and spent most of the night outside, watching the house, but to no avail. Bright moonlight would have made it impossible for anyone to approach the ranch-house without being seen.

Lucky slept late, but Peter kept watch. They were finishing breakfast when Elmer Pierce, the deputy sheriff, rode in.

"Just came out to see how you're getting along," he said, as he sat down and offered to eat some bacon and eggs. "How are you, Pete?"

"Swell," grinned Peter.

"What's new?" asked Lucky.

"Not a thing," replied Elmer. " 'Course me and Lum are getting the blame for not having the jail filled up with suspects—but we can't seem to find any fresh ones. Only four eggs, Lucky—I'm kinda peckish this morning. Stummick's upset a little. Five, six pieces of bacon will be enough. Oh, if you've got more'n that cut—I'll wrestle around with 'em. Between the heat and the worry, I just can't seem to get up any appetite. Turn them eggs over, will you, Lucky? I just can't stand seein' 'em looking at me with them yaller eyes. Kinda remind me of Lum, accusin' me of not working hard enough."

"Do you work hard?" asked Peter.

"Even the children are agin me," sighed Elmer. "Pete, that is a question that I can't answer intelligently. Don't let the toast burn, Lucky; I can't abominate black toast."

They finished breakfast and Elmer sprawled on the front porch while Lucky

and Peter cleaned up things. They decided to ride back to Center City with Elmer. They needed some groceries. Elmer was glad of their company.

"I hate to ride alone and I hate to eat alone," he said.

"How about drinking alone?" asked Corrigan.

"Under pressure, I can do it, Lucky—but only as a last re-sort."

They were in no hurry, and the sun was hot. Where the road wound through some mesquite on a mesa, they could see down toward the forks of the road, where the Medicine Tree stood alone, a lighter green against the desert foliage.

A LONE rider was coming up the main road and he swung in near the Medicine Tree and pulled up. The three riders on the mesa drew up, too. Circumstances made them suspicious of every movement. The man sat there for fully a minute, before he dismounted and went over to the tree. They were unable to see what he did, but he was back quickly, mounted his horse and rode back toward town, traveling at a swift gallop.

"That's kinda funny," remarked Elmer. "What'd he do over there?"

No one knew. Lucky said, "Let's watch the place, Elmer."

For several minutes they sat quietly, looking down at the old cottonwood tree, which was about four hundred yards away.

"Elmer, could you identify that horse and rider?" Corrigan asked.

The deputy shook his head. "That blasted heat makes everything kinda shimmer down there. Dark horse, that's all I could tell."

It was the keen-eyed youngster who made the first discovery. He pointed to a spot below the tree excitedly.

"There's somebody down there—I seen 'em move!"

"Are you sure?" questioned Elmer.

"Of course, I'm sure!"

"Maybe it was the heat," suggested Elmer, wiping his eyes.

"No, I saw a man move. There he is again!"

They all saw him this time. He was on his feet, moving in the brush, and it looked as though he were kicking at something. A rifle shot blasted out, echoing against the side of the mesa. They forgot to see what became of the man in the brush.

From off to their left, a lone rider was going swiftly toward the Medicine Tree. He made a running dismount, stumbled and fell, but got up quickly, and went around the tree. A moment later he was out, on his horse, and going directly away from the men on the mesa.

"Didja ever see such hair on a dog?" gasped Elmer. "C'mon!"

They raced their horses for the Medicine Tree. Elmer dismounted and circled the tree, shoving his way through the growth which grew thickly around it. He came back quickly, panting.

"There's a hole in the other side, but it's empty. C'mon."

Cautiously they circled the spot where they had seen the man in the brush, and he was still there. A rifle bullet had smashed his right shoulder, and he was unconscious.

"Good gosh, what next!" Elmer said. "That's Slim Tigard, Brad West's gunman!"

"Look!" exclaimed Peter. "Rattler—and a big one, too!"

The big rattlesnake was twisting around some brush, evidently injured. Lucky shot it.

"That snake must have scared Tigard and made him get up," Elmer said. "That's how we happened to see him. I reckon that other feller saw him, too. But what the devil is this all about?"

"No time to figure that out, Elmer," said Corrigan. "Head for town and get the doctor; we'll stay here."

It was about five miles to Center City, but Elmer made it in fast time. Lucky and Peter hunched down in the shade of the brush, watching Slim Tigard.

"Do yuh think he'll die?" Peter asked.

"No, I don't believe it. He's hit hard, but he looks tough. Peter, I don't want you to mention a word of what I told you about the men who wrote us that note. We don't know what this is all about, but it looks as though somebody put their money in the Medicine Tree. Maybe this Tigard was planted here to watch the tree and to gun down the man who came to get the money. But the man who came to get the money was too smart. Maybe he knew he was bein' watched. If it hadn't

been for that snake—well, you can't tell. They got the money and Tigard got a bullet for his pains."

"I won't say a word," declared the boy, "but I'm sure scared."

Several men came back with the sheriff and doctor. They brought a wagon and some blankets. Among them was Buck Cross. He drew Lucky aside and asked him what it was all about.

"Elmer didn't tell us what happened," he said, "except that Slim Tigard got shot."

"We saw a man on horseback after the shot was fired," said Lucky. "He pulled out fast. I reckon he shot Tigard, but we don't know why."

"It's sure funny business," declared Cross. "Too much shooting."

CHAPTER V

At the Medicine Tree

THEY loaded Slim Tigard into the wagon, and all went to town. Lum Briggs and Elmer rode together, and Corrigan surmised that Elmer told him all they had seen from the mesa.

Lucky and Peter swung away from the others and went to the general store. As they stepped up to the door, it opened and they met May Stewart. Both the girl and Lucky stopped short, looking at each other.

Peter said, "Gee, Miss Stewart, we've sure been having a time!"

"You surely have, Peter," she said quietly. "I'm sorry about your father. I didn't get a chance to see you, you know."

"Sure," said Peter. "You know my pardner, Lucky Corrigan."

It was rather embarrassing. They looked at each other, both swallowed painfully, as though it was a rehearsed act, and then they both started to grin.

Lucky said, "I'm sorry, May, I—well. . . ."

"Are you and Peter—pardners?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, I—well, we—yes, we are," he stammered. "You see, I needed a pardner, and Peter needed one, too—so we kinda took root."

"I see. Peter is one of my favorite pupils, you know."

"He's my favorite pardner," said Corrigan. "Which makes it seem that we both have the same favorite." His grin seemed forced.

May said, "Lucky, are you afraid of me? You didn't look at me in church."

"I—I reckon I was scared, May. After what happened—and me comin' back here—no one was glad to see me, and all that. Well, I just didn't look at anybody—much. Oh, I know—folks are talkin' a lot. Maybe I was wrong—comin' back here. Sort of a show-off thing to do—they think. I'm not askin' for their friendship. All I want is a chance to prove that the law was wrong."

"I hope you do, Lucky."

"Do yuh, May?"

"Yes, I do. Ted would like that, too."

"I reckon Ted would," said Lucky quietly. "He'd know I didn't; he was my best friend."

"I know he was, Lucky. I hope you can prove it—prove that you were innocent, I mean."

"It might take a long time May—the trail is cold now."

"And we might not live that long," added Peter soberly.

May looked at Peter and back at Corrigan, her eyes anxious.

"What did he mean?" she asked.

Peter went on into the store, and Lucky shook his head.

"Just the remark of a child," he said.

"He said 'we,' " reminded May. "Lucky, is there something wrong going on? I know that Tug Sims was killed and that man Tigard shot today. And now Peter says, 'Maybe we won't live that long.' "

"Please don't worry about it," he begged her. "I'll take care of Peter and he'll take care of me. We'll get along. After all, nobody has shot us—yet. And you better not be seen talking too long with me. I'll see you again—I hope, May—and thanks for talking to me."

He didn't wait for her to go on, but went abruptly into the store. "She's awful pretty, ain't she, pardner?" Peter said.

"Yeah, I think she is, Peter. We'll get what we need and pull out for the ranch."

"You *think* she is?" jeered the youngster. "Why, I could hang my hat on your eye-balls, when you was talkin' to her."

"You've been listenin' to Elmer Pierce," laughed Lucky.

Lum Briggs, ordinarily placid and unemotional, was thoroughly upset. He sat in the office and glared at Elmer Pierce as though blaming him for all their troubles.

"I'd like to go fishin' for a month," Elmer said.

"Most folks go fishin' for fish!" snorted the sheriff.

"You're upset, Lumley," murmured Elmer. "You let little things bother you. Be calm, like I am."

"Upset!" Lum Brigg's clenched right hand banged down on his desk-top. "Upset, yuh say! Why not, I ask yuh? Three murders and a man all crippled up—and I'm lettin' little things bother me!"

"'Course, it could be worse, Lum."

"How could it be worse?"

"Well, suppose it'd happen to me or you—that'd be worse."

LUM sank back in his chair, glaring at Elmer. "Yeah," he said, "I never thought of that. Huh. Ever since that blasted Lucky Corrigan got out of jail...."

"You can't blame him, Lum, he's got a clean alibi for every one of them disasters. Lucky didn't do none of it—and he don't know any more about 'em than we do."

"Mebbe not, but...." The sheriff closed his eyes and after a few moments he said, "Elmer, ain't you got any idea what that man looked like—the man who done the shootin' out there?"

"Nope. Heat-haze makes an awful bad light, Lum; and that man was shore movin' fast. Maybe Slim Tigard knows who he was—I dunno."

"I just come from Doc's place. Tigard is conscious, but he says he don't know who shot him. About all he'd say was, 'That darned snake spoiled it.' Spoiled what, Elmer? What'd he mean?"

"Just between me and you," replied Elmer, "I figure that Slim was hiding out there, aiming to salivate that feller when he showed up. The feller was also cognizant of the fact that Slim was staked out there for that very purpose. When the snake made Slim move, this here drygucher was able to spot Slim—and he made the best of it. Don't ask me why the man rode over to the Medicine Tree. Kinda looked as though the first men left somethin' there and the man who shot Tigard went over to get what the first man left."

"And there we are—right back at the beginnin'," sighed Lum. "If Slim Tigard was staked out there to murder that man—he got what was comin' to him."

"That's a right cheerful theory," said Elmer. "But didn't I tell you and Ben Eastman there'd be entrails to clean up? Didn't I? 'Course, I did. By golly, sometimes I almost believe I'm psychic."

"You're what?"

"That means that I can prophesy things that'll happen."

"That's fine. Set there and figure out what'll happen at the next meeting of the county commissioners—if me and you don't stop this orgy of crime."

"You don't have to be psychic to know what that means, Lum. We'll be dumped out on our dumb heads."

Lum turned toward the doorway as Ben Eastman, the prosecutor came in. He sat down wearily.

"They are still at it, I see."

"Why don'tcha say, 'Murder is still rampant?'" asked Elmer.

"Yes, I believe it is. How is Tigard—still alive, Lum?"

"Uh-huh. Doc says he'll live. If he knows anything, he ain't going to tell anybody. I want to have a talk with Brad West, soon's I see him."

"Brad's over in the Saguero Saloon, drinking straight whiskey out of a waterglass," said the lawyer. "I asked him what it was all about, and he—well, he said he agreed with me—we need rain."

"Brad don't ord'narily drink," offered Elmer.

"Well, he's making up for lost time," smiled the lawyer. "What do you know, Lum?"

Lum Briggs sighed and looked at Eastman gloomily. "Ben," he said quietly, "you'd be surprised at how little we know."

"I've been thinking this over," said Eastman. "The moment that Lucky Corrigan came back here—trouble started. No, I don't say he has anything to do with it—but it seems queer. Two men murdered the night he reached El Pintado, another murdered here, and now they almost

killed Slim Tigard. I say, it's funny."

"You'll have to do the laughin' Ben," said Elmer. "Any old time you've got murders in your immediate vicinity, it just ain't funny. Who's next? Mebbe you, Ben—mebbe Lum."

"What about you?" snapped Lum quickly.

"I'm just a deputy sheriff."

"Ain't worth the powder and lead, huh? I've allus said that."

"By the way," remarked the lawyer, "I came down past the bank a few minutes ago, and I saw Frank Parker up there. You remember him, Lum; the man who represented the express company at Corrigan's trial."

"Oh, yeah, I know who you mean, Ben. I suppose the express company are still wondering where the hundred thousand dollars went."

"They should—it's a lot of money."

"That's right. You know, Ben, the bank was lucky that night. If Ted Stewart had signed a receipt for that money, the bank would have been responsible."

"They sure would. Emory Wade still shivers at the thought. What is Corrigan doing out at the Lazy K—anything?"

"Living," replied Elmer. "Him and Pete Stone."

After Eastman left the office Elmer said, "You want to know something, Lum? I'll betcha seven dollars against the hole out of a second-hand doughnut that Lucky Corrigan was paroled to dig up that money. I'll betcha that's why Parker is down here, tryin' to find out why he ain't done it."

"Elmer," said the sheriff soberly, "you may not be the dumbest person in Primivera Valley, but you'll do very nicely until a dumber one comes along."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Briggs," said Elmer, "but you should know by this time that I am not susceptible to flattery."

BRAD WEST came out to the Lazy K that afternoon. He looked old and worried. He sat down on the shady porch with Lucky and the boy, nervously slapping the leg of his chaps with a quirt.

"You know what happened to Slim Tigard this mornin'," he said.

"Yeah," nodded Corrigan, and then, as

[*Turn page*]

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and . . . Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."

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a long-shot, he said, "How much money did you leave at the Medicine Tree, Brad?"

West didn't seem surprised over the question. "That's the worst part of it—I didn't. You see, they sent me a note, telling me to ride to the Medicine Tree, put the money in the hollow on the south side of the trunk and then ride back to Center City. Well, I got smart. Long before daylight, Slim was planted out there, watchin' the tree. His job was to gun down the man who came to get the money. As far as I can find out, a rattler crawled in close to him and scared Slim so badly that he got up and kicked the snake, giving somebody a chance to notch a sight on him."

"Some man," said Lucky, "who was planted there ahead of Slim Tigard. You say you didn't put in any money—but you went over to the tree, West."

"I know it—I played smart. I just put in a note, telling 'em where they could go. You see the note told me to leave the money there at exactly eleven o'clock this morning. I kinda wish I had. Slim would be alive and well, which he might not be now—and I wouldn't have to dodge at shadows."

"Yeah, I reckon that's right. Brad, don't you own a black-and-white gelding?"

"I sure do, Corrigan. Magpie is the best—" Brad West hesitated and looked sharply at Lucky. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"We'll show you—c'mon."

Lucky and Peter took Brad West down back of the stable and to the dead pinto in the brush. West swore bitterly as he knelt down and looked the animal over. Lucky explained what happened that morning, and just how come that pinto was piled up in the brush. West examined the saddle carefully, but shook his head.

"I don't recognize that old hull," he said huskily, as they went back to the house. Lucky said nothing, and West, added:

"Listen Corrigan! If I came out here to bush you—do you think I'd ride a circus horse?"

"I didn't figure you, West," replied Lucky. "Somebody stole your pinto and rode it out here. They aimed to gun down one or both of us from that brush up there, and if we lived and saw that pinto, you'd be in a bad spot."

"Bad spot?" West smiled grimly. "I better get home before dark. I tell you, I'm gettin' spooky, Corrigan."

"Look at this, and ask me if I am," smiled Lucky, and handed the note he had received to Brad West. West read it quickly.

"Don't the poor fools know you can't pay it?" he asked.

"I ain't exactly sure, but I feel they're tryin' to run me out of here, West. I can't pay—so I either run or take a chance."

"Well," Brad West got to his feet, "all I can say is that I'd be willing to give half of the Circle Seven to the man who can put that gang behind bars."

"We ain't got anything to offer," said Lucky, "but we'll sure do what we can to stop 'em cold—won't we pardner?"

"You're speakin' for both of us, pardner," replied Peter.

Bart West laughed, as he patted Peter on the shoulder. "See you some more," he said, and rode away.

Peter and Lucky slept behind barred doors that night, but nothing happened to disturb their slumbers. Corrigan lay awake for a long time, building up theories and discarding them.

They were very careful next morning, fearing another rider might have hidden away in the brushy hill.

At breakfast Peter said, "Lucky, how long will we have to be scared?"

"I've wondered that myself," smiled Corrigan. "I don't like it any better than you do, pardner—but until our luck turns. . . ."

Peter was satisfied with the answer, and helped Lucky clean up the place after breakfast. It was about noon, when Buck Cross rode in and came up to the house.

"I was in town," he said, "and I thought I'd ride out and see how you are gettin' along. The postmaster had a letter for you Lucky—so I brought it along."

While Peter talked with Cross about the pinto pony, Lucky opened the letter, after scrutinizing the envelope carefully. Inside was a single piece of paper, with the familiar pencil-printing in sprawling capitals. It said:

AT SIX O'CLOCK THIS EVENING YOU WILL GO *ALONE* TO THE MEDICINE TREE. IN THE HOLLOW TRUNK YOU WILL FIND A NOTE WHICH WILL TELL YOU WHAT TO DO NEXT. TELL NOBODY AND GO *ALONE*. YOU WILL BE WATCHED ALL THE TIME AND REMEMBER—WE KEEP OUR WORD.

Lucky put the letter in his pocket, said nothing about its contents, and sat down to roll a cigarette. Peter was talking about the pony, and Buck Cross was greatly amused.

"I'm sure glad yuh enjoy the pinto, sonny," he said. "He was no good to me."

"I'm awful grateful to yuh," said Peter honestly. "I don't know how we'd get along with only one horse."

They discussed things in general, but there was no mention of what happened to Slim Tigard, nor of the other killings.

"Buck," asked Lucky, "have you sold any cows off the JY?"

Buck laughed shortly and shook his head. "Not yet, Lucky. You see, I'm just getting started and it's a hard pull. No, I don't reckon I'll be selling anything for another year—if then. You can't build up surplus beef in a few months."

After Cross rode away Peter wanted to know what was in the letter, and Lucky read it to him. The boy's eyes widened in amazement.

"You ain't goin' out there alone!"

"Well, I don't know, Pete. A thing like this takes time to figure out. They're pretty smart at that—makin' me go there in daylight. They can spot anybody else who might try to stake out."

"Well, gee," said Peter, "suppose we didn't get the letter? We might not go to town. If Buck Cross hadn't seen the postmaster . . ."

"Yeah, that's true," nodded Lucky thoughtfully. "I wonder what's in the tree—or will be in it? They'll tell me what to do next."

"I'm goin' along," said Peter flatly. Lucky laughed quietly.

"They drew a black line under the words 'alone', pardner. That means you won't be goin'. No, I'll be alone—and you'll be here, hid away where they can't find you."

"But don't yuh see," pleaded Peter, "it might be a scheme to shoot you."

"Yeah, it might, pardner. But they don't need a scheme to shoot me. I'm out and around. No, I don't believe they want to kill me—not now."

Later that afternoon Corrigan decided to have Peter hide in the hayloft in the stable. There wasn't an extra revolver around the place, but he pumped the last cartridge they owned into the chamber of the old thirty-thirty.

"Pardner," he said, "you know how to cock that gun and how to pull the trigger. We'll lay it flat on the floor, with the barrel lined up with the hole and the ladder. If anythin' goes wrong, and somebody tries to get up to you, pull that trigger."

"Yea-a-ah," whispered the boy. "I'll do her. Good-luck."

They shook hands in the stable and Lucky went out to his horse, while from the hay-hole in the back of the stable Peter watched him ride away.

CHAPTER VI

Peace in the Valley

CORRIGAN had plenty of time to make the ride to the Medicine Tree. He rode slowly down to the edge of the mesa, where he watched for a long time. A hundred men could have been hiding in that brush. The late afternoon sun slanted on the Medicine Tree, bringing it out in strong relief against the dull gray of the desert growth.

It was nearly six o'clock, when Lucky saw a buckboard coming on the main road. There was little breeze, and the dust-cloud almost enveloped the equipage. It swung sharply to the left and came on the road to the Lazy K. Lucky spurred quickly aside and rode into a heavy thicket of mesquite, where he was entirely concealed. He heard the buckboard rattle past his concealment, and rode out in time only to see the dust and an occasional glimpse of the team and buckboard.

Suddenly he realized that the buckboard was going to the Lazy K. It was the end of the road. He had about two minutes to reach the Medicine Tree. He rode slowly down off the mesa, but suddenly set his spurs and went at top speed toward the tree.

"If this is a murder-trap—they better be trap-shooters!" he told the wide world.

Nothing happened on the way down. Lucky drew up sharply, got off and ran quickly around the old tree. There was a

note in the hollow. Crouched low against the tree he read it quickly.

WE'VE GOT PETER STONE. UNLESS YOU LEAVE THIS VALLEY AT ONCE HE WILL NEVER BE SEEN ALIVE AGAIN. GET OUT—NOW! WE KEEP OUR WORD.

Lucky got quickly to his feet, breathing fast. It had been a trick—a trick to get the kid—to force Lucky Corrigan out of Primivera Valley.

He mounted quickly, yanked down his hat and spurred back toward the Lazy K. They were so sure they would get the kid that they wrote it as a settled fact. Maybe not! Still, what earthly chance would an eight-year-old boy have against hardened criminals?

AFTER Lucky left the ranch Peter watched things from the hay-hole in the loft. Everything was quiet except for the clacking of winged grasshoppers, the calling of a magpie from the top of an old tree and the buzz of wasps going in and out of the loft. Peter discovered a wasp-nest, fastened to a rafter in the loft.

Suddenly he blinked and ducked his head. There was a man, half-out through the front doorway, looking around. Peter drew a quick breath and flattened out on the boards. The man was masked!

After a quick look around he stepped out on the porch and called toward the stable, "He ain't in here—you better look in there!"

Peter slid back, hooked his fingers around the grip of the old rifle, carefully drew back the hammer, and waited, hardly daring to breathe. Lucky had said, "If anything goes wrong . . ." Masked men were certainly wrong. Peter listened for the man to open the stable. If he came up that ladder. . . .

Someone was calling again, and Peter heard a man say, "Look out! Here comes somebody!"

Peter released the old gun and slid back to the hay-hole. A buckboard and team had come through the open gateway and was on its way up to the house. Peter recognized the team and the buckboard. "That's Lum Briggs' buckboard!" he exclaimed.

As the team turned close to the porch, a masked man stepped out and covered the two persons in the vehicle. Another man was running up from the stable. He had a mask over his face, too. They were making two people get out of the buckboard—and one of them was a woman. Peter almost shouted a warning when he saw that the woman was May Stewart and the man was Elmer Pierce, the deputy sheriff.

They were taken into the house and the door closed. Peter was just a little sick inside. A man came out and tied the team. Peter wondered where Lucky was and if he was all right. He tried to think of a prayer, but all he remembered was about lying down to sleep. This was no time to think about sleeping.

Then he heard galloping hoofs as Lucky Corrigan rode into the yard. The horse hadn't stopped when Lucky dismounted, stumbled, but caught his balance. Peter screamed a warning, but it was blotted out by a rifle-blast. He saw Lucky jerk up short, crumple at the knees and go flat on his face.

Two masked men ran from the house, and quickly examined Lucky. The man in a red mask turned and yelled back, "We got him dead-center! He's as dead as a door-knob!"

Dead as a door-knob! Peter's eyes filled up, and he had to dig out the tears. They had killed his pardner. He blinked through the tears, and got a distorted view of three men, forcing May Stewart and Elmer Pierce into the buckboard. One man was driving, with a man standing behind May and Elmer. The third man was on horseback, leading two saddled horses.

Peter picked up the rifle. The man on the horse was the red-masked one, the one who whooped over hitting Lucky dead center. The driver of the buckboard team swung the animals around, heading for the gate. Peter steadied the barrel of that rifle against the side of the hay-hole, notched his sights on the red-masked man, and squeezed the trigger.

The short-barreled .30-30 blasted back into Peter's ears, and the stock banged his cheek-bone so hard that he sat down. His vision was a bit distorted for the moment, but he saw the red-mask off his horse, going around and around in a circle like a pup trying to find a spot to lie down on.

Peter heard a man yelling, and a moment later a fusillade of bullets smashed into the hay-loft. Peter rolled over and over and ended up in a corner, where the

roof came down to the floor. He couldn't see what was going on, as one of the shooters blew splinters into the loft with great regularity. Peter stayed put, until the shooting ceased, but by that time the buckboard was gone, together with the three saddle-horses and the man he had hit with that lone bullet.

Lucky's horse had gone down by the corral, and stood there, looking at Peter, as he came out through the doorway. Peter's knees were very weak as he reached Lucky, but he gave a whoop of joy. Lucky Corrigan's shoulders were moving! He wasn't dead. But his head was covered with blood.

It was getting dark. too. Peter managed to turn Lucky over on his back, and the big cowboy drew a deep breath, his eyes opened.

"Lucky, it's me!" exclaimed the boy. "Don'tcha know me, Lucky?"

LUCKY lifted his left hand and felt of his head, bringing the hand away with the fingers painted red. He shifted his eyes and looked at Peter and tried to grin. "I reckon . . . I . . . ran . . . into . . . . somethin'," he said jerkily.

Then he sat up, dizzy-eyed and spat dryly. He was beginning to remember a little. He looked closely at Peter.

"They didn't get you!" he exclaimed. "Who—who was in that buckboard?"

"May Stewart and Elmer Pierce. They got 'em, Lucky!"

"I'll make it to the porch, Pete," he said weakly. "Get me a lot of water—I'm all dried out."

Lucky drank part of the water and poured the rest over his head.

"They said you was dead," remarked Peter, "and you ain't either."

"I—I heard that," said Lucky painfully. "Did they try to find you, Pete?"

"Uh-huh. They searched the house, and was goin' to look in the stable, but the buckboard came and . . . Lucky, I hit one of them!"

"You what?"

"I did so! They started away, and I—I knocked one man off his horse. He was fallin' down and then they started shootin' at the hay-loft. They must have taken him away with them."

"You hit one of them with the thirty-thirty?"

"I sure did. He—he was goin' around like a top, too."

"Well, you brave little devil!" whispered Lucky. "You'll do to take to the wagon. Go saddle your pinto, Peter—we're going to town."

"Do you think you can ride all right, Lucky?"

"Right now," replied Lucky, "I could ride chain-lightnin' bareback."

It was well after dark when they rode into Center City. Lucky wanted a place to leave Peter, and the only place he could think of was Doctor Lane's home. Lucky had known the old doctor most of his life. Peter didn't want to stay there, but Lucky overrulled him

"Pardner, you've got to play safe in a deal like this."

Doctor Lane looked with amazement at this blood-smeared cowboy and the excited youngster, but quickly agreed to keep Peter.

"Lucky, that head needs attention!" he exclaimed. "Let me fix you up."

"No time, Doc—later, maybe."

Lucky had no clear idea of what he was going to do, but he was satisfied that he knew part of the gang, at least. Doctor Lane's place was just beyond the home of Emory Wade, the banker. As Lucky swung into his saddle, he saw two men ride swiftly up to the front of Wade's home, dismount and go up the walk. It seemed a bit unusual for two men to race their horses up to a banker's place at night; so Lucky led his horse up there. A quick examination of the two horses in the dark indicated that they had gone far and fast.

Wade's home had a wide porch at the front, and a huge window. Lucky saw the shade yanked down over the window before he reached the horses. Now he swung through the open gateway and went toward the porch, going cautiously over a graveled walk. He could hear voices in the house, and discovered that the blind had been yanked down over a partly-opened window.

Lucky reached the railing of the porch, where he stopped and listened.

A voice was saying, "No, we didn't. Corrigan fell for the note, but we couldn't find the kid."

"Where is Corrigan?"

"He's at the ranch, shot through the

head. Oh, we fixed him—but we didn't find the kid."

"What's this about Pierce and the woman?"

"I told yuh, they rode in on us, boss. We've got 'em tied up in the wagon, about a mile out of town. Joe's holdin' 'em out there."

That statement brought a burst of profanity and recriminations.

"Wait a minute!" snapped Buck Cross' voice. "We've done the work, and you get the big cut. Don't tell me what I've done wrong."

"But you didn't get the kid, Buck. That's—"

"We got Corrigan. Either that kid or somebody else was up in the hay-loft at the ranch, and they took a crack at us. Joe lost his left ear, and almost lost his life. We bandaged him up as well as we could, but he's in pretty bad shape."

"Why did you come here?" asked Emory Wade harshly. "The whole town is jittery. You two, ridin' in here fast . . . at night . . ."

"Stop shakin' will yuh? I'll tell you why we came, Wade, we want our cut of the money and we want it now! Don't tell us it's in the bank, because we know better. Your idea of takin' over this valley was crazy—look what it led to! You said we could do it without killing anybody and looked how it turned out. We're through, Wade. All we want is our share—now—and we're headin' south."

"So you're turning yellow, eh?" snarled Wade. "What about the girl and the deputy in the wagon? You can't—"

"Just as soon as we get our money, we ride out there, dump 'em beside the road and pull out. They'll be found in the morning."

"You mean alive? Don't they know who you are?"

"Well, if they don't, they're awful dumb, Wade. They saw Joe, with his mask shot off. Of course, they know who we are."

"But you can't let them live—not now."

"They're goin' free and unharmed, Wade. After all—we're pullin' out. And don't fool yourself—Corrigan knew too. Go dig up that money. If you can lie fast enough to save your own skin go to it, Wade, but it's too late for us to lie. Get the money."

Lucky saw the silhouette of Emory Wade against the shade as he went between the window and the lamp. For several moments he was gone, but suddenly the silhouette was back again, clear against the shade, but this time he held a rifle or a shotgun, and his voice was blazing.

"Hands in sight, both of you! I had this gun planted here for just such a thing as this. You won't get money—you'll get buckshot."

"Wait a minute, Wade!" exclaimed Buck Cross. "You can't—"

"Can't I?" Wade laughed shortly. "It's perfect. You two came here to force me to go to the bank with you and I got the drop on you. There isn't a thing on earth to connect me with you, Cross. I've been careful. Keep your hands in sight. You poor fools, you played right into my hands. If I have to, I'll go out and get—"

CORRIGAN took a chance and smashed a bullet through that big window, which fairly exploded under the impact of the .45. The shotgun blasted in the house, and there were two more blasts of a six-shooter. But the light was out now. A man crashed out through the doorway, lead spewing from his sixshooter, splintering the top rail of the porch. It was too dark to see anything, except the flashes.

Corrigan had ducked low, sending shot after shot at the flashes until his gun clicked empty. He stepped back, brushing splinters from his face. Men were running down the street, yelling at each other, and suddenly the yard seemed filled with men. Lucky felt old and tired, his feet braced, as men jostled him. A man lighted a match on the porch, and yelled:

"Here's Buck Cross!"

Lucky heard Lum Briggs' voice saying, "Get a lamp lighted in the house. What on earth went on here?"

The lamp was lighted and Lucky went in. Men stared at him. His head was bleeding again, and fresh blood seeped down across his left cheek. Lum grabbed his arm and asked him what happened.

A man said, "There's Emory Wade and Hank Mills!"

Lucky looked around the room. There was Brad West, staring at him, Sam Harte, the storekeeper, Ed Sawyer, from the hotel. Lum was still trying to get Lucky's

attention, demanding an explanation. Lucky looked down at Emory Wade, and the banker was blinking up at the lamp.

"Maybe Mr. Wade wants to talk," Lucky said.

Wade turned his head and looked up at Lucky Corrigan, as two more people forced their way inside. They were Peter Stone and Doctor Lane.

The doctor panted, "I—I couldn't hold the kid—when he heard the shots."

Lucky said, "It's all right, pardner—hold still. Wade, how about you talking? Remember, I heard it all through the window. I stopped you from murdering both of 'em in here. You might as well tell the truth—in your condition, Wade."

WADE'S eyes shifted to Doctor Lane, who nodded.

"You haven't much time, Emory."

"Time enough to admit that you and your gang planned to steal Primivera Valley," said Lucky. "When the cattlemen didn't fall for your threats, you had 'em shot, Wade."

"I—I didn't kill anybody," said Wade weakly. "Buck and the boys did it. No money in banking—we wanted it all. You came back and things went wrong. I don't mind telling it now. Where is Buck?"

"Buck cashed in," said the sheriff.

"Another thing," said Lucky tensely, "you and your gang staged that bank robbery, Wade, and put the deadwood on me. You might as well go out clean."

"That's . . . right," admitted Wade painfully. "Most of the money is in my wall safe, here in the house. Everything . . . was . . . all . . . right . . . until . . . you . . . came . . . back . . ."

"He's dead!" exclaimed a man. Doctor Lane knelt down and made a quick examination. "He merely fainted," said the doctor. "He will live to hang."

The crowd parted to let in Al Tremayne, May Stewart and Elmer Pierce. May looked frightened and disheveled.

"What's this all about?" Tremayne said. "I found these folks all tied up in a wagon, and Joe Suder on the ground, half-dead from loss of blood. Good gosh, there's Emory Wade and . . . what happened?"

May was staring at Lucky.

"You're not dead? They said . . . we saw you and. . . ."

"He-e-ey!" yelled Elmer. "Yo're alive! Lucky, you look like an operation that I might have performed!"

"But he ain't guilty!" whooped Peter. "He proved that he ain't!"

"Well, I—I'll say it's a miracle," declared the sheriff. "From Emory's own lips, he exonerated yuh, Lucky. There's a lot of things I don't know about this crooked deal—but I'll learn, in time."

Brad West grinned at Lucky.

"Lucky Corrigan, how on earth did you find out who was doin' all the killin'?"

"I didn't—I just suspected, West. Yuh see, when Buck Cross brought that last letter out to me, he said he got it at the postoffice. Well, there wasn't no Center City postmark, and the stamp had been soaked off an old letter and pasted on mine and the cancellation showed enough to prove that the stamp was cancelled in Phoenix. He couldn't take the time to post the letter to me. And you know, I been wondering how Buck Cross had money enough to hire two cowpokes, when he didn't have no money from sales and all that. It didn't look right. The man who tried to bush us at the ranch lost Tug Sim's watch, but I never found out who he was."

"That was Joe Suder," said Elmer. "He bought it from Tug. If you'd have asked me, I'd have told you."

"We wasn't askin'," said Peter stoutly. "Lucky didn't need to—he's smart."

"Thank you, pardner," said Lucky soberly. "I reckon we can go back to the Lazy K and live in peace now."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed West. "Remember the offer I made you, Corrigan? Half of the Circle Seven? That holds good. I need a man to run it. I'll buy the JY and the Lazy K, and we'll bunch 'em. Of course," Brad West's eyes shifted to May and back to Lucky, "of course, I'd like to have a married man runnin' the Circle Seven—they're steadier."

Lucky looked at May, then his eyes strayed to the eager face of Peter Stone.

"Well, yeah, I—I think that'd be wonderful, Brad. But what about my pardner—here?"

"I've got a darned good idea!" blurted Elmer. "We'll make him best man at the weddin'."

"For once in yore life, Elmer," declared the sheriff, "you've said somethin' intelligent."

BLOOD on the

While Vargas and Sorrillo fought, a Colt leaped to Steele's right hand

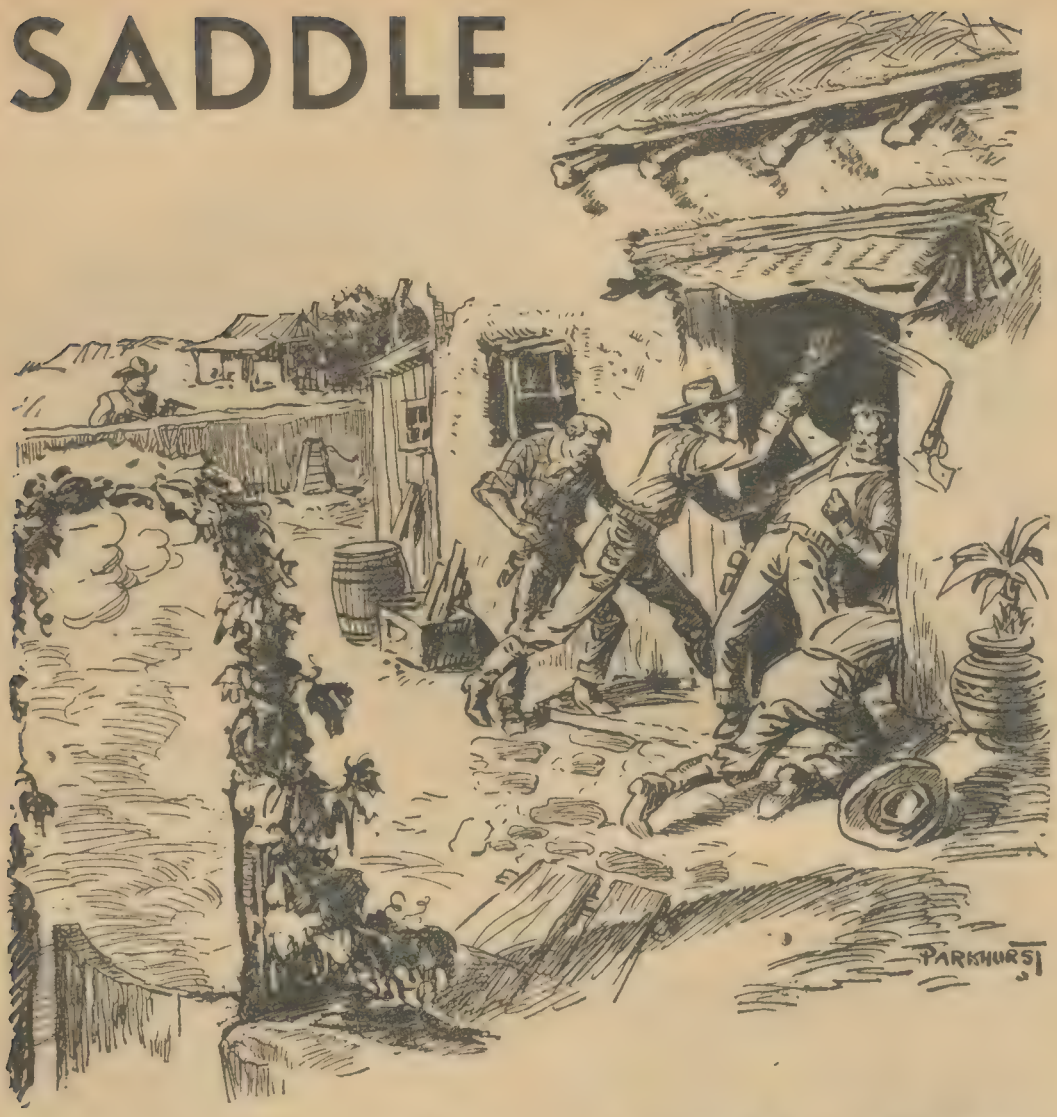
CHAPTER I

The Mustang Stallion

THE rains came in August, as they always had—slashing gullywhackers that in the long process of time, had worn the Arizona desert into fantastic patterns of erosion. On that late summer night, Sheriff Blue Steele and his little deputy, "Shorty" Watts, sat in front of the Painted Post jail, watching the lightning display. Rain already was drenching the Caliente Hills. Cooling gusts made it pleasanter outdoors than in the saloon down the street, where everybody else in town was gathered.

The Sheriff of Painted Post Tackles the

SADDLE



a Blue Steele novelet by TOM GUNN

Shorty sat on a wooden bench, with one doubled-up leg hugged against him. "Well, Sheriff," he yawned drowsily, "yuh expect it'll wet the dust around here tonight?"

Steele, in a chair tilted back against the adobe wall of the jail, drew his cigarette into a glow and drawled:

"Not likely, segundo. No more than a sprinkle, anyhow. The high country gets most of these thundershowers."

"What'll yuh bet?"

"What have you got?"

"One lonesome dollar that says this street dust'll turn tuh mud by midnight."

There came then, as though in response

Strange Mystery of the Riderless Mustang!

to Shorty's confident forecast, a streak of jagged lightning so vivid that it lighted the town and its bleak surroundings as brightly as noonday, for a flashing instant.

In that instant, Steele's keen, rock-gray eyes saw a vague shape and movement, up by the town corral at the head of the street, where the stage road entered.

Steele tensed. His chair legs thumped down on the platform sidewalk as he straightened. Shorty let go of his up-raised leg and went alert too. "What is

SHERIFF BLUE STEELE

it, Sheriff?" he gusted. "What'd yuh see, huh?"

"A horse."

"Migosh, that all? Everybody rides hosses tuh town!"

"No rider on that horse, segundo. It was jogging up to the corral gate with reins dragging."

"Yuh don't say!"

The little hedheaded deputy jumped from the bench. Steele was already on his feet, heading for the corral gate.

They reached the stray quickly. Shorty made for the reins. The horse snorted and shied away. Steele dropped the gate bars.

"Herd him in, segundo," he called out in the darkness.

It took the two of them to persuade the fractious animal to enter. Then they upped the gate bars and went to the brush-roofed ramada that served as a crude tack shed, where saddles and harness were stored. They got a lantern and lighted it.

By this time, the horse was among some others at the feed rack. They crossed towards it. Still wild and spooky, it frisked away.

"We'll mighty soon settle that!" grunted Shorty, trotting back to the ramada and getting the lariat from his own saddle.

SHORTY was an ex-cowboy and handy with a rope. His first throw dropped a noose over the head of the elusive animal. He hauled it tight and made for the restless, circling horse hand-over-hand. Steele moved along beside him, carrying the lantern.

Getting to the rope's end, Shorty reached for the bit chains. Cat-quick, the horse reared back and struck viciously at him. The front hoof barely grazed the little deputy's leg.

"Good gravy, a mankiller, huh?" he blurted.

"Better snub him up to the feed rack, segundo. We've got a mustang stallion on our hands, a mean one."

They managed it, between them. Steele raised the lantern and they sized up the jumpy creature with the knowing eyes of experienced horsemen.

"Something out of the ordinary," mused the Sheriff. "A grulla sarco."

Shorty blinked.

"I'd call it a claybank-colored cayuse."

"Grulla means a claybank in Mexican lingo, segundo. Sarco means china-eye. We've got a china-eyed claybank mustang stallion. I've never seen him before. How about you?"

Shorty shook his head slowly, as his gaze explored the rough-coated, underfed, hammer-headed, narrow-chested specimen disdainfully. It glared back, the odd, white eye shiny in the lantern light.

"Tough an' wiry, but I wouldn't give two-bits for him."

"Not a handsome critter, I agree, segundo. But look at that silver-mounted saddle and headpiece."

"Yeah. Out o' place on a crowbait like that. Like a silk hat on a roundup. Well, I'll just peel off that saddle, then mebbe we'll know more about who rode it."

Another blinding lightning stab made

the grulla sarco jump and quiver as Shorty cautiously cricled him to get at the cinch. With gentling talk, he ran a hand along the nervous withers and lifted a stirrup.

Thunder boomed near. A black cloud was blotting the overhead stars. "Git yore dollar ready, Sheriff," Shorty chirped. "Looks like I got yuh beat as a weather prophet. Tain't often that—hullo, what's this? Hey, come look, Sheriff!"

With long, rapid strides, Steele joined him. Shorty pointed at a red splash on the saddle skirt that extended onto the mustang's flank. Then he stared blankly at the palm of his hand. In touching that sinister stain, it had come away sticky-moist.

"Somebody rode intuh trouble on this critter, and mighty recent!" he exclaimed.

He swiftly removed saddle and blanket, a coarse-woven Navajo, found a spare rope halter on the feed rack, took off the bridle and stood back, hands thrust deep in his pockets, his brow puckered.

"Not a blamed thing tuh tell us who the unlucky rider was. Nuthin' but that dim brand on the left hip. That XY brand."

"Not a brand of record. Not in Arizona, anyhow."

"That leaves us with a flock of unanswered questions, don't it?"

"Five of them. The first is, who? We don't know, not yet. Question Two—what happened?"

"That blood says he was shot, an' shot bad."

"Question Three—why? We need an answer to the first question before we can guess at that. Question Four—when did it happen? Right recently, we know that. There's sort of an answer to Question Five. Did you notice, segundo?"

"Nope. Tell me."

"The dragged reins are damp and mud-caked. That tells us that the killing—if there was a killing—happened north of the Caliente. This animal crossed the river to get here."

"By golly, that's right! No other water anywhere around. That is, not till it rains. That brings up another question, which makes one more than yuh mentioned, Sheriff. Question Six is, who done it?"

"Correct, segundo. Number Six is important, because the answer will explain all the others."

As he spoke, Steele felt a splatter on his hat and shoulders.

Shorty's rain had arrived.

"You're also correct in your weather guess. Or else lucky."

"Correct in my guess, lucky if I kin collect on it," grunted the little deputy.

Steele lifted the saddle to his shoulder. "Let's get this gear under cover and make for shelter our ownselves, segundo."

DEPUTY SHORTY WATTS

BLUE STEELE went swiftly to the ramada, where he covered the saddle with the blanket. He lingered there for several moments, before blowing out the lantern. Shorty, at the corral gate, grew impatient.

"Better hustle, Sheriff!" he called out. "It'll be pourin' pitchforks mighty sudden!"

The lantern blinked out and Steele came. They swung down the street past the jail, Shorty trotting to keep up. They went on to the saloon, entering just as the clouds dumped their load with the suddenness of an upturned bucket.

So now they faced the hubbub in Thimble Jack's place. About twenty townsfolk, ranchers and punchers were there. The abrupt, grim-faced arrival of Blue Steele produced a hush. In that momentary lull, Shorty yipped

"Hold yore gab an' poke out yore ears,

gents! Me an' the Sheriff, we've got a mystery that needs explainin'!"

That got attention. Steele held it suspensefully as he peeled off his gray Stetson and sleeved raindrops from it.

The Sheriff of Painted Post was one who could command attention without effort or words. He was a lean, hard six-footer, sun-bronzed and with a smooth, catlike coordination in every movement. A well-worn silver badge adorned his long-worn calfskin vest, and his open-necked shirt was snug across wide shoulders that tapered to a hipless middle.

Twin Colts were open-holstered to a single buscadero cartridge-belt, studded with .45 loads. His matchless dexterity in the use of those six-guns had made him a shining, living legend in the Border country—throughout the wide Southwest, for that matter. He had brought law to a land that mocked at the word. His daring exploits were a byword. He had survived almost incessant danger—always with his loyal little deputy. There was a breed of undesirables that held the pair in wholesome awe.

Shorty Watts was his comical opposite in appearance—a homely, red-haired freckled runt with an impulsive disposition and a clownish grin. "Go ahead, Sheriff!" the little deputy prompted restlessly. "Tell everybody what we found, and ask 'em what they know about it!"

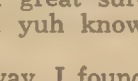
Steele told, in a few terse words, about the strange grulla sarco, and the empty, blood-spattered saddle. "The rider," he finished, "was a cripple. A limpy hombre."

Shorty batted his eyes in great surprise. "How in creation did yuh know that?" he cried.

"When I put the saddle away, I found that one stirrup hung two inches lower than the other. Our missing man had a game leg. The right one."

NEXT ISSUE

THE BOX L GRAB



Another Painted Post Novelet

By TOM GUNN

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER II

Lifer on the Loose

FROM a chair at a corner card table, rose a heavy-set man with a shock of white hair, ruddy jowls and frosty, clawhammer eyebrows. He pushed himself in front of the group at the bar.

Judge John Bertram was the big man in Indian County. He owned T Bar T, the oldest and largest spread. Bertram limped, from an old bullet wound that troubled him especially in wet weather.

"Thunderation, it's lucky I've been here all evening, playin' pinochle with Doc Crabtree, which gives me a pretty good alibi," he rumbled with wry humor. Then he added solemnly:

"In all the twenty-odd years I've been in these part, I don't recollect ever seein' a claybank bronc, Sheriff."

Others shook their heads blankly. Doc Crabtree, a thin, sharp-nosed man with shiny specs and a tuft of billygoat beard riffled the pinochle deck in his pale, delicate hands.

"Seems you're on a cold trail here, Sheriff," he spoke up. "I could use that missing stranger, too, whoever he might be. Been shy on patients lately. This confounded country is too healthy."

"Don't beller about it yet, Doc," Shorty told him. "If he turns up dead, you'll still have his business. You bein' County Coroner, which I always claimed gives a sawbones a handy way o' buryin' his mistakes."

"Think up a new joke, chowderhead!" snapped the Doc.

"Tain't no joke. Well, Sheriff, what now?"

Steele thoughtfully rolled a brown paper cigarette. "With this rain you brought on, segundo, there'll be no tracks for back-trailing that horse," he said.

The deluge drummed on the corrugated metal roof of the ramshackle, two-story saloon building. The bare emptiness of the upper floor, which contained crude sleeping quarters and Doc Crabtree's of-

fice, intensified the sound.

One of the regular upstairs habitues was "Magpie" Stevens, who drove stage between Painted Post and Cottonwood, sixty miles north on the railroad. Magpie was a grizzled, gap-toothed, gabby old-timer who kept up on all rangeland gossip on his twice-weekly trips.

Magpie stood now, back to the bar, bony elbows propped on it, jaws busy with a chew of finecut. He spit in the general direction of a sandbox intended for use as a cuspidor.

"I been a-thinkin', Sheriff," he announced, in his thin, quavering voice as he wiped his mouth with the back of a weathered hand, "about a set o' hoof-tracks I seen on my down-trip yestiddy."

Steele shot a sharp look at him as he cupped a match to his cigarette. "Let's hear," he said brittlely.

Magpie let the sandbox have it again, clipping the edge of his target. "They come onto the road two-three miles north o' Box L. Ground had been wetted short while before. So the tracks showed fresh. They stayed to the road, down to the mailbox where the Los Pasos trail forks off."

"How come you took such special notice?"

"Because I stopped there at the forks, that's how come. I leave all Los Pasos mail there regular, in that barrel nailed to a post. The rider, whoever he was, had stopped there. His hoofprints an' boot-tracks too showed that he'd poked into the barrel mailbox. Why? I says to myself, it's uncommon that anybody after Los Pasos mail would come from the north, instead of uptrail from the southeast."

"Where did the tracks lead from there?"

"From the mailbox? How'd I know? I ain't got time to go shaggin' around off the road. I just moseyed on down to Box L flat, where I changed to a fresh team, per usual, then proceeded onward on schedule."

"Thanks, Magpie. That might turn out to be a help."

"Always plumb glad to help out, Sheriff. I got a eagle eye, a lively mind and there's many a time when—"

Judge Bertram chopped off the talky Magpie with his deep, booming voice: "That XY brand you mention, Sheriff, not being' in the Arizona registry, probably comes from a long way off. New Mexico, southern Utah, California."

"Not necessarily, Judge. I reckon you know that there are plenty of one-man outfits here in the Territory, local brands that never were recorded. Some of them out of use and forgotten."

"Sure, sure. Plenty such in Tonto Basin, and over in the Gila Bend country towards Yuma."

Bertram's remark suddenly kindled Steele's eyes with glints like metal-speckled granite. He plucked the cigarette from his lips.

"That's it!" he rapped out. "You hit on it, Judge!"

Bertram looked befuddled. "Good Godfrey, hit on what?"

"Yuma! The XY brand! That fancy saddle!"

"I don't savvy what you're drivin' at!"

"Me neither," declared Shorty.

Steele flicked his unfinished cigarette outdoors, over the top of the batwing

[*Turn page*]

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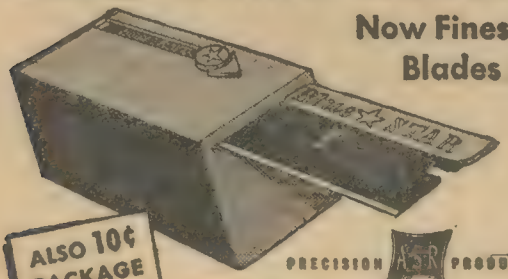

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doors. "XY stands for a name, segundo. A name that neither one of us is likely to forget."

"Name? What name?"

"What word does X mean, segundo?"

Shorty tugged hard at one red ear. "Why, X is—is the sign for ten, huh?"

"Correct! Ten and Y, means Tenny, doesn't it?"

The little, redheaded package of restless energy exploded like a bundle of firecrackers.

"Good Gravy! Tenny! Bronc Tenny?"

A thin smile flicked Steele's lips. "That," he said, "is the answer to our Number One 'who' question. The missing rider of the grulla sarco is Bronc Tenny, unless I'm badly mistaken."

"But migosh! Bronc Tenny is servin' a life sentence in Yuma Prison!"

SLOWLY, the sheriff raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Lifers sometimes make a getaway," was what he said.

That remark brought a smothered exclamation from Thimble Jack. The slick-haired, pouch-eyed bartender produced, from a shelf under the bar, a copy of the weekly Tucson *Citizen*, brought by Magpie in the latest mail. He whipped it open and pointed to a brief item at the bottom of the front page.

Steele took the paper, his eyes flicking the news as Shorty craned over his shoulder, and stumblingly read it aloud:

BULLETIN—As this issue goes to press, a telegraphed alarm reaches the U.S. Marshal's headquarters here about a prison break at Yuma. Five felons escaped, but all were recaptured except a prisoner named Tenny, who has served seven years of a life sentence for murder. The fugitive is considered a desperate and dangerous character and has a bloody record.

Doc Crabtree laid down the pinochle deck and twisted around in his chair. "Will somebody," he demanded waspishly, "kindly tell me who is this Bronc Tenny?"

Shorty produced the information with chattering excitement. "Yuh ever heerd o' the big run-in that me and the Sheriff had with a band o' desperadoes that used Rancho Robles for a owlhoot nest?"

"Some, yes. That was just before I landed in Painted Post."

"Well, we thinned 'em out proper! Gunned a few, brung some others to trial, and they got sent up for long terms. The main squeeze in that ruckus was this here hellaroo, Bronc Tenny!"

"Thunderation, yes!" whooped Judge Bertram. "And well I remember, when I sentenced that outlaw that he swore to high heaven, if he ever got loose, how he'd kill the man who shot him in the leg and captured him!"

"And who was that man, John?"

Judge Bertram looked across the smoky, crowded saloon, to a man who had calmly reached for makings and was spilling dry tobacco crumbs into a curl of brown paper.

"Our Sheriff," he said with husky concern, "Blue Steele."

CHAPTER III

Dead or Alive?

KEEPING up an almost steady downpour, the rain didn't let up until midnight. Then, under clean - washed stars, Painted Post's one and only main street had turned to rivulets of mud, as Steele and Shorty returned to the jail office, which was their sleeping place.

The little deputy stretched, yawned and perched on the edge of his blanketed cot, where he started to pull off a boot. Then he thought better of it, dropped his foot to the floor and got to his feet with a weary sigh.

"Migosh, I plumb fergot to shake down a flake o' hay for that claybank critter!" he fretted. "And him tied short to the feed rack. So reckon I better do it now, before turnin' in, huh?"

"Go do it, segundo. Keep clear of those wicked hoofs."

"Hosses like that were Bronc Tenny's style, remember? He liked 'em mean an' rough-broke."

"Rounding up and putting mustangs to saddle was his specialty. I also remember that he hunted wild horses in the Gila Bend country, and was supposed to have had a hangout there. A ranch place where he went when things got hot for him."

"Yeah. Some o' his old crowd prob'ly holed up there, after Bronc Tenny was sent to prison. Chances are, they had a hand in his escape, huh?"

"Pretty good chance, that's just what happened. Little by little, we're getting answers to our questions, segundo. But there's one big question that tops 'em all."

"What's that, Sheriff?"

"Is Bronc Tenny dead? Or alive?"

"That's a mighty important question, all right enough! If he wasn't finished off, yuh're in big danger every minute! So long as he's alive and on the prowl!"

Steele nodded somber agreement. "Come tomorrow, we'll have a looksee up Box L way," he promised. "Those tracks Magpie saw might have been Tenny's, according to what we know now."

"Mighty little will be left o' them tracks, in these rains!"

With that, Shorty left the jail office and sloshed his way up to the corral. He climbed through the gate bars and went to the feedrack.

Only moments later, he rushed breathlessly back into the jail office, wild-eyed and with freckles standing out on his paled face like new pennies.

"Migosh, Sheriff!" he shrilled. "The stallion's gone!"

Steele went tense, his rugged face granite-hard. "Slipped its halter, maybe?"

"No, no! Clean gone from the corral! That silver saddle an' gear, they're gone too!"

Almost before Shorty could get it out, Steele was buckling on his heavy gunbelt and the twin Colts. He reached to the set of antlers on the wall above his desk for his JB hat and went, Shorty streaking after him, hanging on his own cartridge belt and blunt-nosed .45 as he went.

"Go easy, Sheriff!" he pleaded. "Creeation, yuh might git potted any second!"

"There's been plenty of chance for that already. I don't think Bronc Tenny was here, segundo."

"Then who—?"

"The jigger who bushwhacked him came after Bronc's horse."

"But why—?"

"That's hard to say just yet. Get Magpie's lantern."

That didn't take long. Steele touched a sulphur match to the wick and a small circle of the light grew in the darkness at the corral gate. Steele explored the soft, soaked ground briefly.

HIS inspection ended with that one-shouldered shrug of resignation, his way of dismissing unsolvable problems.

"Our caller timed his visit mighty fine," he stated tersely. "Came during the rainstorm. It blotted out his sign completely."

"Hey, put out that lantern, Sheriff!" sputtered Shorty. "No sense in makin' yoreself a easy target. There's still a off-chance that it was Bronc Tenny that came. And I wouldn't bet that he went."

"Then why hasn't he finished his errand before now?"

"The jail office was prob'ly dark at the time, us bein' down at Thimble Jack's durin' the rain."

"All the better an opportunity for a killer. Gunning over a saloon door is a cinch."

"Mebbe he didn't feel up to that, and a chase afterwards. Him bein' shot hisownself."

"I still claim," Steele insisted, "that Bronc Tenny hasn't shown up here. If he was the rider at the Los Pasos mailbox, that hints that he had more'n one iron in the fire."

"Meanin' what, Sheriff?"

"That he came to settle with some other enemy, too."

"Could be," Shorty admitted doubtfully. "But who?"

"Let's think back. That Rancho Robles gang had a falling out among themselves, didn't they?"

"Yeah. A few testified agi'n the rest, as I recollect."

"And who was the one who told how Bronc Tenny killed George Griggs on a rustling raid?"

Once again, Shorty tugged at an ear to help his thinking. "I got it!" he blurted. "That half-breed, the one called Chico Sorrillo!"

"Meaning 'Little Skunk'. Yes, that's the one, segundo. Wonder if that cholo is still around the Border country?"

"Keepin' track o' dodgy Los Pasos citi-

zens is like tallyin' the maggot hatch of a blowfly, only harder!"

Steele did some deep, somber thinking. "There's a way we might find out," he decided. "Let's go consult a gossipy cuss who knows a little bit about everybody."

"Magpie? Shucks, that ol' horned toad crawled in the hay a good two hours ago!"

"Then we'll prod him out. C'mon, segundo."

They returned to the saloon. The crowd had gone. Thimble Jack was standing on the bar, in the act of extinguishing the big, bespangled kerosene lamp that hung from the ceiling, about to close up for the night.

He billyowled around as the lawmen entered, then gave a dismal sigh.

"No rest for the wicked! My socks and sins, don't you bullbats ever go to roost?"

"Not when there's need tuh set up," Shorty retorted.

"Leave that light be, and rest on your haunches for a little spell," Steele told him.

The Sheriff led the way up a narrow, rickety stairs that led to the sleeping quarters above. Then back along a dark, creaky hall to Magpie's door. It scraped noisily as he pushed it open with a foot.

"You've got company, Magpie," he sang out briskly.

A busy snore subsided in a gurgle. Steele and Shorty entered the tiny, board-walled room. Steele struck a match and lighted the lamp on a stand beside the cot.

Magpie sat up, eyes squinted to the light. "What for you fellers come a-rootin' and a-tootin' in here?" he blazed. "I got a long trip tomorrow! I need my rest! I—!"

Steele sat on the edge of the bed and sent him back on his pillow with a gentle shove. "We're looking for a party known as Chico Sorrillo," he began.

"Expect to find him here in bed with me?" Magpie demanded angrily.

"Look, Magpie," Steele said, "It's a known fact that nothing gets past that eagle eye and lively mind of yours. You bring all the mail south of Cottonwood. You read the postal cards and check on postmarks. How about a little help?"

The flattery smoothed down Magpie's ruffled feathers a little. He reached for his pants and a pinch of finecut.

"A unlettered buckaroo by such a nickname as Chico Sorrillo ain't likely to carry on a extensive correspondence," he pointed out. "What's his real name?"

"Who knows?" shrugged Steele. "Do you?"

"Nope."

MAGPIE locked his gnarled fingers behind his head and stared pensively at the ceiling.

"Here's something, though," he said finally. "Awhile back, I did notice a letter postmarked 'Yuma' in the Los Pasos mail."

"Addressed to who?" Steele urged.

Magpie again studied the ceiling, giving special attention to a dampish stain caused by a leak in the roof.

"Keerless o' me not to notice," he admitted reluctantly. "But I happen to recolleck it was sent in care o' Rancho Robles."

Steele got to his feet. "Fine. That'll help, old-timer. Thanks a heap."

"Oh, don't mention it!" snorted Magpie, hackling up again. "O' course, you couldn't o' waited till morning for this confab, eh?"

"No. Because the segundo and I make pasear now, tonight."

Shorty went up in the air. "Migosh, Sheriff! What for? Where?"

"Rancho Robles, segundo. Naturally."

The little deputy ran a hand across his weary brow. "If only I hadn't gone back up tuh the corral tuh feed that mustang," he mourned, "I'd o' been in my soogans now, like a normal human bein'!"

"It'd take more'n sleep to make you normal, Noisy!" grumped Magpie. "Now clear out, vamoose, both o' you!"

On the way back up the dark, silent street, Steele said:

"If we locate that grulla sarco, segundo, it's pretty sure we can find out who rustled him from the corral. And that'll lead us to answers for a flock of other questions."

NEXT ISSUE

BUCKSKIN MAN'S WAR

By SCOTT CARLETON

CHAPTER IV

"Little Skunk"

RANCHO ROBLES long had been a breeding place for quick violence and lasting hatreds. The old-fashioned hacienda stood on a ceinega slope north of the lower Caliente, about three hours ride from Painted Post.

The foothill spread adjoined Bertram's T Bar T on the south, but being in neighboring Los Pasos County was outside Steele's bailiwick. So the Sheriff was definitely without authority there. He was persona non grata in a big way, and so was Shorty Watts.

Red dawn spanned the desert sky as they rode up the trail from the slow, winding river. Not so slow now, but roily and high from storm runoff. Gumbo balled on the hoofs of the Sheriff's sleek steel-dust gelding and Shorty's black-and-white pinto. Rain had soaked and rutted the trail, making hard going.

Rancho Robles, a historic land grant dating back to days of Spanish rule and occupation, was operated nowadays by a Los Pasos group. It was known to the lawmen that the outfit was largely made up of scions of the oldtime followers of Don Pedro Robles, killed in the big fight that followed his unmasking as the big boss of Border outlawry. Bitterness had never died in the hearts of those vanquished henchmen, and that bitterness focussed on Blue Steele, who had brought about Don Pete's undoing.

So now the low, wide tile roof of the old place loomed through the fringing trees. Shorty made a long face.

"Only one sure thing we can count on here, Sheriff."

"What's that, segundo?"

"That we won't git invited in for breakfast."

"It's the cavvy corral that we're heading for, not the cookshack."

"Okey, Sheriff, okey. But me, I'm hungrier'n a she-coyote. Hope I don't smell vittles cookin'."

Reaching the circular, pole-sided corral, they reined up at the gate. One look inside was enough. There in the Robles corral was the mustang stallion that had vanished a few hours before from Painted Post.

"What now?" demanded Shorty.

By way of an answer, a door opened over at the ranchhouse. A knot of wary-eyed Robles cowhands appeared in the opening. Steele kneed the gelding across the ranch yard, to the low wall that hemmed in a neglected patio garden beside the house.

"Who's boss here?" Steele inquired.

One of the men, older than the rest, stepped outside. He was spare-built, his dark hair laced with gray at the temples. He had a lean, wolfish face, the left jaw deeply-scarred. He wore a six-gun thonged snugly to his right thigh. As he faced them, he hooked a thumb in his belt, close to it.

"You call early, senores," he said evenly. "*Porque,* for why?"

"For a horse thief."

"So? Whose horse, please?"

"Chico Sorrillo will answer that. Where is he?"

The other ran his thumb along his belt, groping for a reply. "What if I should say," he ventured finally, "that I know nobody of that name?"

Steele's granite gaze went to the group in the doorway. "I'd say you were lying," he stated bluntly.

His eyes were on a man of about Shorty's build, and with the same self-assertive erectness. He was in an undershirt. The others were full clad. There was not a look about his eyes of one just risen from a night's sleep.

Moreover, the man was vaguely recognizable, for all the six crowded years that had followed Bronc Tenny's trial and conviction.

"You," Steele said, pointing, "Come out."

Steele's keen searching scrutiny saw the tired, red-rimmed eyes widen, just for an instant. He saw more than that. The man's boots were muddied, with dried smears on his upturned levis.

The stocky buckaroo swaggered to the doorway. "But for sure," he smirked. "To be agreeable, whatever else."

"You're Chico Sorrillo, the Little Skunk."

"If I am, what then?"

Steele's bluff had worked magnificently, so far. How much longer, Shorty wondered.

"Why did you bring the grulla sarco here?" Steele demanded pointblank.

"You're the owner, perhaps?" sneered the other, folding his bare arms defiantly.

"I don't think it'll be much trouble to prove that you gunned the owner, Chico."

CHICO'S tone was scornfully sarcastic as he replied:

"Ah? The body, you have found it, yes?"

"Time enough to find Bronc Tenny, now that I've found you. Let's go, Chico."

The older man, the one with the gun, spoke up now. "Pardon, Senor Sheriff, but this one you call Chico takes orders from me, not you."

"It's the law that's boss," chimed in Shorty, who had been silent about as long as he could stand it. "Don't fergit it."

"Painted Post law? This is not Painted Post. Don't forget that," the older man retorted.

"Here's a point of law for you, major domo," Steele said. "In a shooting, it isn't fenced in by any county boundaries, savvy? I'm bounded by the boundaries of Arizona Territory only. We've palavered enough. Get started, Chico. I'm arresting you for gunning Bronc Tenny."

Chico Sorrillo barked a scornful laugh.

"Say that I did, what then? It was a great favor to you, no? He came to kill you. Now, for saving your life, you come to arrest me! Hah!"

"One thing more, Senor Sheriff," said the Robles boss, his voice oily with false politeness. "Allow me to ask, is it unlawful for a peaceable citizen to guard his own life from a wanted fugitive?"

The group beyond the doorway nodded and muttered approval.

Shorty groaned. "Migosh, if sumthin's going tuh happen, I wish it'd start! All this law talk's got me dizzy!"

The little deputy didn't have long to wait for fulfillment of his wish. The Little Skunk darted behind the Robles boss, holding him there with an arm locked around his throat. He jerked out the latter's six-gun and covered Steele, hardly fifteen paces away.

Shielded behind the greater size of the major domo's body, the Little Skunk gave a wild, taunting laugh.

"One who looks for trouble finds it!" he cackled. "You, back of me, Vargas! Go get the Sheriff's guns! I have him covered, him and that flyspecked segundo! Now, Vargas, *andale,* quickly!"

CHAPTER V

Shorty Tumbles

ALL this excitement had grown out of the theft of a wild, half-broken mustang that wasn't worth much to anybody. A horse that, in all possibility, didn't have a living owner, anyhow.

It was like this, since the beginning, that petty incidents had produced trouble out of all proportion to the original offense. It was the way of the borderland, the way of unruly men, quick violence and lasting hatreds.

In tamer places and in more settled times, no lawman would have dared what Blue Steele undertook at Rancho Robles. The risk of failure was too great.

But boldness had built the fabulous reputation of the Sheriff of Painted Post. That reputation had become a weapon, often as effective as the twin Colts. Out of such spectacular episodes, awe of Steele had spread among hardened characters who respected only one law—the law of force.

So the one called Vargas was ordered to take his guns. No man had ever performed that feat and lived to boast of it. If Steele was disarmed now, it would end his hard-won reputation. It would be a blow beyond repair to law on the Arizona Border.

The Little Skunk's dodge was a put-up job. That was easy to see now. The Robles hoss had, by prearranged plan, played the role of helpless dummy. It was an old trick, so shoddy and outworn that Steele blamed himself bitterly for

failing to foresee and forestall it.

It was Shorty, the rash and unpredictable, who saw the way to beat the drop. He had nearly toppled out of saddle when the Little Skunk made his play. Maybe that was what gave the little redhead his idea.

Vargas started, though plainly reluctant and uneasy. He was halfway across the patio, to the arched gate. Then Shorty went limp and slumped from leather, on the off side of the pinto.

Sorrillo snarled and triggered. But he blasted only empty air, where Shorty had been. No more than had he hit the ground, and Shorty scooted like a lizard to the thick abode wall.

It ran for thirty feet or more, giving him crouching concealment. The far end was at an angle from which Sorrillo would not be shielded by the Robles boss. Vargas dropped as the six-gun sent a blast dangerously close past his own head. Then he scrambled back to the doorway.

"Go for Steele, like I told you!" cried the Little Skunk.

"To die?" breathed Vargas. "Uh-huh, Chico! I am not your fool!"

As he tried to crowd past, to get back in the house, Sorrillo struck viciously at him with the six-gun. Vargas fended the blow by seizing Sorrillo's arm. For a split-second they struggled.

That fragment of time was enough for a Colt to leap to Steele's right hand. The others, behind Sorrillo, saw it coming and ducked. The Colt spoke. Sorrillo gave a shrill, agonized cry. His upraised arm wilted at the wrist. The six-gun clattered to the steps.

"Don't try!" Steele sang out as the Robles boss dived for it.

NOW the Colt thundered again. The fallen weapon leaped from reach at the smash of the Colt slug. The major domo jerked his hand away, as though burned, and straightened.

The Little Skunk, no longer arrogant but pale and shaken, gripped his gushing wrist to halt the blood flow.

"Doc Crabtree is at Painted Post," Steele reminded him. "If anybody has the know-how to save your hand, it's him. How about it, Chico?"

Shorty bobbed up at the far end of the wall, his .45 levelled across it. "Decide sudden, hombre!" he rasped.

Chico nodded numbly. Steele motioned the Colt muzzle at the Robles boss. "Lope for the corral and saddle the mustang!" he ordered.

The lean, graying man twisted out a wry smile. "One cannot always win, Chico," he said huskily. "Come."

Steele close-herded the pair across the ranch yard. Shorty stayed at the wall, the .45 ready for business.

"Just stand there in plain sight, the rest o' you!" he barked. "Till I say when! Nobody moves but you, Vargas! Kick that shootin' iron out here, through the gate!"

Vargas obeyed promptly. Shorty edged along the wall and got the gun, poking it inside his belt. Then he ordered Vargas back with the others. Steele soon was back, herding the grulla sarco, his captive on it, his bloody wrist bandaged with strips torn from the Sheriff's shirt.

Then Shorty laddered onto the pinto. He lingered until Steele and the Little Skunk were well out of gunreach, then tilted after them.

"I was skeered there, for a minute, that I wouldn't git tuh collect that one-dollar rain bet yuh owe me," he grinned.

"Nice work, segundo, that tumble."

"Migosh, I had tuh figger some way tuh git back tuh town in time for breakfast!"

The trail was drying, the going easier than it had been. So they rode fast, to the limit of the wounded man's endurance. About nine o'clock they reined up in front of Thimble Jack's place, then quickly got their groaning prisoner upstairs to Doc Crabtree's office.

Then Shorty tootled for Chow Now's, the eating place across the street. By the time he had disposed of a hearty, belated meal, the Doc had finished with his patient and Steele had him in jail.

The Sheriff was pacing the jail office, an unlit cigarette between his lips.

"The Chinaman's got it waitin' for yuh, Sheriff, on the back o' the stove," announced Shorty.

Steele didn't share the little deputy's gusto.

"Coffee, maybe," he said. "Right now, I'd rather have facts than food."

"Facts? About what?"

"About Bronc Tenny," Steele said, motioning Shorty outside, out of earshot of the prisoner in the bunk, back in the

single barred cell.

"Good gravy, our one-winged hombre finished him, didn't he?"

"So he claims. But his story doesn't hang together."

"How come?"

"The truth is, I think Chico brought the mustang to the edge of town last night."

"Migosh, why?"

"To make it look as though Bronc Tenny was dead. The idea being, to end the hunt for him."

"B-but the blood on the saddle—!"

"Listen, segundo, Box L and the Los Pasos mailbox is a good twenty-five miles from here."

"Yeah, that's right!"

"The blood was too fresh to have come that far. Also, reins dragged such a distance would be plenty frayed and worn."

"Mebbe yuh're right!" Shorty said wonderingly. "But why in all creation would Chico o' gone tuh that trouble, only tuh steal the hoss agin?"

WITH his usual unconcern, Sheriff Blue Steele shrugged one shoulder. "Chico claims he got a tipoff that Tenny was coming to get him, and that he waylaid him at the mailbox, where Tenny, probably suspicious that such a message was sent, came to steal it out of the mailbox."

"Well, that sounds okey, Sheriff."

"But if he really had dropped Tenny there, as he claims, Magpie would have come onto the body."

"Mebbe Tenny wasn't plumb dead, an' crawled off."

"Possible, but not likely. But it was neither possible nor likely that Chico knew that the grulla sarco had strayed clean here, and could be found in the Painted Post corral."

"Then what d'yuh figger did happen?"

They were at Chow Now's now. Steele straddled a stool at the counter as the old Chinese poured a mug of hot, black coffee.

"There are two or three dozen ways of looking at it, segundo. The best guess I can make is that something happened between the time Chico brought the grulla here and the time, soon after, when he came back for it. Something happened that caused him to switch his plans. What was it? Maybe your bright head can hatch out an answer. No sugar this time, thanks, Chow Now."

The wrinkled old cook jolted Steele and Shorty by leaning towards them, and declaring in his sing-song pidgin English:

"Me savvy, Sheliff. Me no sleep good last night, too muchee sky noise. Me see um two man, two hossee come townside!"

CHAPTER VI

Bronc Tenny

BANGED onto the counter, the contents of the coffee mug slopped over the rim. Seldom did the steady-nerved Sheriff show surprise so plainly, eagerly. "Tell me, what did you see?"

Chow Now understood the speech of his adopted land better than he spoke it. His wise old face puckered with the effort of finding words to express himself.

"Two men come befo' she lain."

"Before it rained, eh? What did they do?"

"One getum off hossee up so," Chow Now related, pointing up the stage road, past the corral. "Him go. By'n by come one man, one hossee, pletty soon go with two hossee, in lain, savvy?"

"Migosh, that's about as clear as yore cawfee, Chow Now!"

"Clear enough, segundo," Steele said, up quickly from the stool and back across to the jail, with Shorty legging after him, spluttering questions.

Steele stood at the barred cell, his face a grim mask, his gray eyes metallic slits.

"Chico, your story doesn't hold water," he stated brusquely. "You didn't gun anybody up Box L way yesterday."

"Go away, let me rest!" moaned the Little Skunk.

"Not till I get the truth out of you, hombre!"

The prisoner rolled his head helplessly. "Truth? What does it matter now?"

"Plenty!" Shorty shot at him. "Save

yorself a heap o' bother by spillin' it now, El Skunko!"

The prisoner studied their faces with bloodshot eyes. He drew a deep breath.

"So, then. I dropped Bronc Tenny where you never will find him, Steele. Not in your bailiwick. I got a letter, warning me to expect him. He would come for you first, I knew. I waited at the Caliente ford. I bushwhacked him as he rode across. I tried to catch up his horse, but couldn't, all the way here to Painted Post. I saw you corral that two-bit mustang. Come the rain, I got it."

"Why?"

"That silver saddle, it was a fine one. I wanted it—who wouldn't? You know the rest. Now go, curse you both!"

Steele's fingers were busy with cigarette makings. "Chico," he said coldly, "you've patched up one lie with another. Let's have the straight of it. Or would you rather let me tell it?"

The Little Skunk came up on an elbow. "It is the truth, I swear!" he cried wildly.

"Here's what happened," Steele went on. "You came here last night, yes. But not alone."

Steele paused, letting that sink in. The prisoner turned a shade paler.

"You came with Bronc Tenny. Yes, I expect you had word he was coming, all right, as the prison break was planned. The two of you had somehow patched up your differences, evidently. You met him where the trail forks, there at the mailbox. Along about dark, after the stage had passed, the two of you headed south. For Painted Post."

The Little Skunk wasn't the only agitated one now. Shorty was flabbergasted. He gaped, saucer-eyed with a dawning dread. The felon who had come to kill had lurked here only a few hours before! Where was he now?

"Somewhere along the way, you figured out a smart dodge," Steele continued. "You hit on the scheme to make it look as if Tenny was dead. No body for evidence, of course. But you knew that I'd find out, through that XY brand, that the grulla sarco was his. That's why you hazed it here, where I'd be bound to find it."

"B-but migosh, Sheriff!" piped Shorty. "Why'd they swipe it back?"

[*Turn page*]

ADVERTISEMENT

Do We Have To Die?

Thirty-nine years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong, can be solved.

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He was about to be sent back to England to die, when a strange message came—"They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there, under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his 21 years in the Far East. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power which there came to him.

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As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. L-462, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

"Chico just now told that. That silver saddle is worth plenty dinero. Tenny needed payoff money, for whoever helped him escape prison. They realized that the rain made tracking impossible, so Chico felt in taking it to the Robles spread."

"B-but the blood on the saddle—!"

"Just part of the frameup, segundo." The Little Skunk gasped a curse.

"The devil is with you, as always, Steele!" he wailed. "So you know! The blood on the saddle gave us the idea in the first place. Crossing Box L range, Bronc rode into a barbed wire fence that Old Man McCall put up since Bronc last rode these parts! He cut his leg bad!"

"Th-then Bronc Tenny, he's still alive an' on the loose!" gabbled Shorty. "Good gravy, Sheriff, why didn't he git yuh last night, when he had a wide open chance?"

"And fetch all the law in the Territory here, hot on his trail? Including a pack of shoot-to-kill manhunters from Yuma? No, segundo. Liberty was more important to Bronc Tenny than revenge. So the nub of the whole scheme was for him to stay dead. For awhile. Until the hooraw died down."

Shorty shuddered.

"Oh migosh, Sheriff! You figger Tenny might o' been there at Robles Rancho?"

Steele gave that unconcerned half-shrug as he lighted a cigarette.

"But any day, any hour, almost any minute he's bound tuh turn up! He'll wait his chance! Yuh won't know where or when he'll make his try for yuh, Sheriff!"

The Little Skunk made a grimace of hatred as he dropped back on his pillow.

"*Absolutemente,* Bronc will show up! He will come to kill you, Steele! Be patient, brother of the devil!"

Steele and Shorty turned away from the cell. The movement was timed exactly with a crash that came from across the street. It was the sharp, shattering sound of broken glass.

Steele's gaze went through the open jail office doorway, to the windowfront of Chow Now's eating place. In the jagged opening, the old Chinaman stood, gesticulating violently with an iron skillet!

Shorty blabbered:

"Cree-ation, what next? The ol' heathen's gone loco! Busted his own window! Look, he's jabberin' and ravin'—!"

A RUSH of confused impressions surged through Steele's mind in that muddled moment. Out of them all, one impression stood out as clear as the desert landscap. Chow Now was pointing with that skillet! A warning!

With a powerful back sweep of one hand, the sheriff sent Shorty staggering against the whitewashed wall, out of line of the open doorway. His other hand acted with what seemed magnetic attraction, whipped a Colt from its holster.

He fired as a gunhand snaked around the doorframe, a glimpse of a fierce, unshaven face above it. A double report dinned in the jail office. The Little Skunk, in his bunk directly behind Steele, gave a stricken, gurgling cry. The cry of a man mortally hit.

The face at the doorway was grewsomely transformed as the two shots thundered almost together. A hideous furrow laid open the ambusher's left temple. His gun dropped. He slumped and fell.

Bronc Tenny was no longer a living menace. The twitching of his brutal, stubbly face was only the aftermath of sudden death. From the cell came a rattly, expiring sound, then stillness. Steele holstered, reached for a match and relighted his cigarette with steady hand.

"Now we know about the whole story, segundo," he remarked, as though the grisly interruption had been only a minor incident, "except just where Lifer Tenny holed up around here, like a coiled sidewinder. Seems as though jailing Chico rushed his plans a little. But he found a Painted Post jailbreak harder than vamoosing Yuma Prison."

Shorty pulled himself together as best he could. Plenty of questions were in him yet, awaiting answers. But the suspense and urgency had passed.

He adjusted his hat at a rakish tilt on his brick-red topknot. He flickered what was intended as a jaunty grin at Steele.

"Before sumthin' else happens, Sheriff, let's git back tuh where we started. We had some unfinished business. About the weather, remember?"

Steele nodded gravely. "Correct, segundo. It's nice knowing that nothing fazes that one-track brain o' yours."

Saying that, he took a silver dollar from his pocket and ceremoniously handed it over to his little deputy.

No Mortgage on Gunsmoke

By DANE ZALE

To save the Bar H, Tom Hamlin takes a long chance!

FOR the sixth time Tom Hamlin felt in the right hand pocket of his levis and assured himself the roll of bills was still there. He had worried about losing that money all the way during the five miles he had ridden from his small ranch to the town of Dark Rock. Turning that thousand dollars over to Boyd Mitchell as the final payment on the Bar H mortgage today was vital. This was the date the payment was due and Mitchell was not a man to wait for his money.

"I sure was lucky in finding a buyer for that herd of cattle this early in the spring," Hamlin muttered as he rode along the main street of the town. "If that feller, John Warrick, hadn't shown up this morning and bought the cattle, I'd be in a bad way."

Hamlin halted his sorrel at the hitching-rail further along the street. He swung out of the saddle, tall, young and husky in his range clothes with two Colts in the holsters fastened to the crossed gunbelts that he wore. He tied the horse to the rail and walked toward a building on the front of which was a sign that read:

BOYD MITCHELL, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW
REAL ESTATE & MORTGAGES

The door of Mitchell's office was closed. Hamlin tried the knob and found the door was also locked. He glanced at a town loafer who was sitting on a bench in the shade at the side of the building.

"Seen Boyd Mitchell around?" Hamlin asked.

"Reckon you'll find him down at the sheriff's office," said the gray bearded old man. "He went down there a little while ago. He said to tell anyone who was looking for him that's where they would find him. Boyd and Sheriff Campbell sure are excited since the sheriff caught them fellers who robbed the Overland stage yesterday."

"I hadn't heard about that," Hamlin said. "What happened?"

"Three masked men held up the westbound Overland about four miles north of here yesterday morning," said the old timer. "Got the express box with eight thousand dollars in it. Sheriff Campbell trailed the bandits, captured two of them and the box with the money still in it, but the third robber got away. Campbell brought in the two men he captured and put them in jail early this morning."

"Thanks for telling me about it," said Hamlin. "I've got to see Mitchell on business so I'll go on down to the sheriff's office."

HAMLIN walked on down the street until he reached the sheriff's office. The door of the office was open and Boyd Mitchell was seated at the sheriff's roll-topped desk as Hamlin came in through

the open door.

"Oh, hello, Hamlin," Mitchell said, getting slowly to his feet. "Somehow I didn't expect you would come here."

He stood looking at the young ranch owner with a strange expression on his heavy face. Beneath his black mustache his heavy lips curled slightly. He wore a gray Stetson, a long coated dark suit. Beneath the coat there were two cartridge-belts buckled around his waist and a holstered gun on each one.

"Why didn't you expect me?" Hamlin asked in a puzzled tone. "The last payment on the mortgage on my ranch is due today and I've got the thousand dollars to pay it."

"So that's it," Mitchell said. "I must admit you have plenty of nerve, Hamlin. Where did you get a thousand dollars?"

"Sold a herd to a cattle dealer this morning," Hamlin said. "He paid me a thousand dollars for the stock."

"Who was this cattle dealer?" the attorney asked.

"Feller named John Warrick," said Hamlin. "Stranger to me, but seemed like a right nice man."

"I know every cattle buyer in this part of the country and I never heard of one named Warrick," said Mitchell. "Seems strange that when the sheriff brought in the two stage robbers and the express money box a thousand dollars of the eight thousand in it was missing. Then you show up bold as brass with a thousand dollars."

"You mean you're accusing me of being the third bandit?" Hamlin demanded, anger in his voice. "You say the thousand I got to pay my mortgage is part of the money stolen from the stage?"

"I am," Mitchell said coldly. "Naturally I won't accept stolen money in payment on the mortgage. Also if you don't settle your just debt to me before the day is over, I'll have to foreclose and take over the Bar H."

"Why, you rotten crook!" Hamlin snapped, covering the lawyer with his left hand gun. "You know I had nothing to do with the stage holdup—that I got this thousand dollars honestly." He drew the roll of bills out of his pocket with his free right hand. "You're going to accept this money and cancel the mortgage here and now!"

There was a telephone standing on the sheriff's desk, one of the first few phones in that part of the country. It suddenly rang, sharply and insistantly. Hamlin was so startled by the sound that he glanced in the direction of the phone.

Instantly Mitchell's right hand flashed down. It came up with a long barreled Colt clutched in his fingers and roaring. More by luck than careful aim the bullet hit the side of the cylinder and knocked the weapon out of Hamilin's hand. His fingers felt numb, but his hand was not injured.

The door at the rear of the office that led to the jail built in the back part of the building swung open and Sheriff Jed Campbell stood there, a Colt in his hand.

"What happened?" demanded the husky, middle-aged lawman. "Who fired that shot?"

"I did," said Mitchell as the phone suddenly stopped ringing. "Hamlin here showed up and said he had a thousand dollars to pay me on a mortgage I hold on his ranch. His having that much money all of a sudden struck me as suspicious. When I told him so he pulled a gun on me and told me I was going to accept the money and hand over the mortgage or else!"

"What happened then?" asked the sheriff.

"Your phone started ringing," said Mitchell. "The sound startled Hamlin and gave me a chance to shoot the gun out of his hand."

"Suppose you hear my side of the story, Sheriff," Hamlin said quietly. "Folks always said you were a fair and honest man."

"All right," said the sheriff, dropping his gun back into the holster. "Put your gun away, Mitchell. Let's hear what Hamlin has to offer."

"Just as you say, Sheriff," the attorney said resignedly. "Though I'm sure you will find that Hamlin is lying."

MITCHELL dropped into a chair, and the sheriff seated himself at the desk. Campbell frowned and picked up the phone. "Never mind, operator," he said. "Thought someone called me but it must have been a wrong number. Thanks." He hung up and looked at Hamlin. "What's your story, Tom?"

Hamlin quickly related how he had sold a herd of cattle to a man named John Warrick and received a thousand dollars for the stock. He was still holding the roll of bills in his right hand.

"Never heard of Warrick," said the sheriff thoughtfully when Hamlin had finished. "Which doesn't prove there couldn't be such a man and he bought your cattle, Tom. But there is a thousand dollars of the eight thousand that was to be delivered to the Black Rock bank still missing. I turned the rest of the money over to the bank. One way we could be sure you're telling the truth, Tom."

"How is that, Sheriff?" Hamlin asked eagerly.

"The bank gave me a list of the serial numbers of the bills of the missing money," said the sheriff, reaching for a paper on the desk in front of him. "Here it is right here. Ten hundred-dollar bills-and their serial numbers."

"That's what Warrick gave me," Hamlin said, handing the roll of bills to the sheriff. "Ten hundred-dollar bills. He said he didn't have anything smaller. Since I aimed to turn the money over to Mitchell right away I figured it didn't make any difference."

The attorney gave a derisive snort, and then again sat silently watching and listening. The sheriff spread the money out on the desk and checked the serial numbers on the bills with the list in front of him. Hamlin waited tensely.

"I'm sorry, Hamlin," Campbell said finally, and his tone was no longer friendly. "This is the missing money. The serial on every bill checks with the list."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Mitchell, rising to his feet. "I told you that Hamlin suddenly having that much money struck me as suspicious. He must have been the third stage robber, Sheriff—the one that got away from you last night."

"Sure looks that way," said the sheriff. "I'm going to have to place you under arrest, and hold you on suspicion, Hamlin."

"We'll see that you and your two outlaw partners get a fair trial when Judge Nelson holds court next week, Hamlin," Mitchell said in a mocking voice. "And don't you worry about the Bar H. I'll put a good man in charge of the place when I take the ranch over tomorrow."

"Right tough on the boy, aren't you, Mitchell?" said the sheriff. "Seems to me that even if the payment on the mortgage on his place is due today, you could give him a little more time." The lawman scowled. "You being so anxious to foreclose on that spread strikes me as kind of suspicious under the circumstances."

"Maybe I am being a bit hasty," Mitchell said. "Tell you what I'll do, Hamlin. I'll give you another week to make that payment. If you can clear yourself and pay me a thousand dollars of honest money I'll tear up the mortgage and call it square."

"That's more like it," said the sheriff.

Hamlin said nothing. He couldn't see how he would have much chance of clearing himself or raising the money while he was in jail. But there was no use saying so now.

The sheriff snapped a pair of handcuffs on Hamlin's wrists and then took the rancher's other gun away. Then Mitchell departed, saying he had to get back to his own office. Campbell led Hamlin back into the jail. As they walked along the corridor Hamlin saw the two other prisoners staring at them through the bars in the doors of their cells.

An idea struck Hamlin. It was a bold gamble, but he decided to risk it. It might work and then again it might not.

"I still say I had nothing to do with the stage holdup, Sheriff," he said his voice loud enough to carry to the other men. "Why should I bother with small stuff like that—only eight thousand dollars. I got fifty thousand out of that bank robbery I pulled off up north two weeks ago, and nobody but me will ever find that money."

"So you're the one who did that job," said the sheriff, much to Hamlin's amazement. "Looks like I caught a bigger fish than I thought when I arrested you, Hamlin. Why, there's a five-thousand-dollar reward for the capture of that lone bandit, and I aim to collect that money."

GRIMLY the sheriff unlocked an empty cell, placed him inside and then locked the door from the outside.

"Don't count on that money," Hamlin said. "You know the old saying, 'A fool and his money are soon parted.'"

"And the same to you and your fifty

thousand," said the sheriff as he walked away.

Time passed slowly for Hamlin during the night and all of the next day. The sheriff and two deputies brought the prisoners their meals and the food was fairly good, but the lawmen were not inclined to do any talking. His fellow prisoners made no attempt to talk to Hamlin either.

On the second night Hamlin stood at the door of his cell peering out through the bars at the other two prisoners in the cells across the corridor from him.

"I've had enough of this," Hamlin said. "If I could get hold of a gun, I'd be getting out of here tonight."

At one side of the corridor beyond the cells was a door leading into an adjoining building. On this door was painted *Court Of Dark Rock.* It was here that the local trials were held.

"If you're smart enough to get out of here, Hamlin," said one of the outlaws, "then take us with you."

"I will if I can," Hamlin said and moved to the bunk and sat thinking.

Finally the sheriff arrived carrying a supper tray. Campbell was alone. He put down the tray and took the big ring with the jail keys on it and unlocked the door of Hamlin's cell. He unfastened one of the handcuffs on Hamlin's wrists.

Then swiftly Hamlin snatched the sheriff's gun out of the holster. He pressed the Colt against the lawman's back.

"I'm leaving now, Sheriff," he said. "March back toward the courtroom door."

"All right," Campbell said sullenly. "But you are foolish, Hamlin."

Just as they reached the court door Hamlin swung the sheriff around in front of him as he heard someone coming along the corridor from the direction of Campbell's office. It was Boyd Mitchell and John Warrick, the cattle buyer who had appeared.

"It's Hamlin!" Mitchell shouted. "He's holding the sheriff as hostage while he escapes. Down him!"

Hamlin stuck his gun around in front of the sheriff and fired at the same time that the attorney's gun roared. A bullet plowed into the door casing near his head. Warrick also fired.

"Careful, Boyd!" Warrick said. "Don't kill Hamlin. We want him alive so we can make him tell us where he hid that fifty thousand he got for the bank job."

"Get the sheriff," Mitchell said. "We'll swear that Hamlin downed him escaping."

They aimed their guns at Campbell as the lawman stood unarmed in front of his prisoner. Hamlin's gun roared twice. Boyd Mitchell staggered back and dropped his gun, a bullet in his chest. Warrick howled in pain. His gun clattered to the floor as a slug got him in the right arm.

"There's your third stage robber, Sheriff," said Hamlin moving out from behind Campbell and nodding toward Warrick. "You'll find that Mitchell got Warrick to pretend he was a cattle-buyer and use that thousand dollars of the stage loot to buy my herd and frame me."

"That's right," said Warrick. "I'll talk. Only get me to a doctor quick. This arm is killing me."

The attorney glared at him, and then Mitchell moaned in pain.

"But what I don't see is why Mitchell was so anxious to foreclose on my spread in such a hurry," Hamlin said later when the two deputies appeared and took the wounded men away under arrest to be treated by a doctor. "The Bar H isn't worth much."

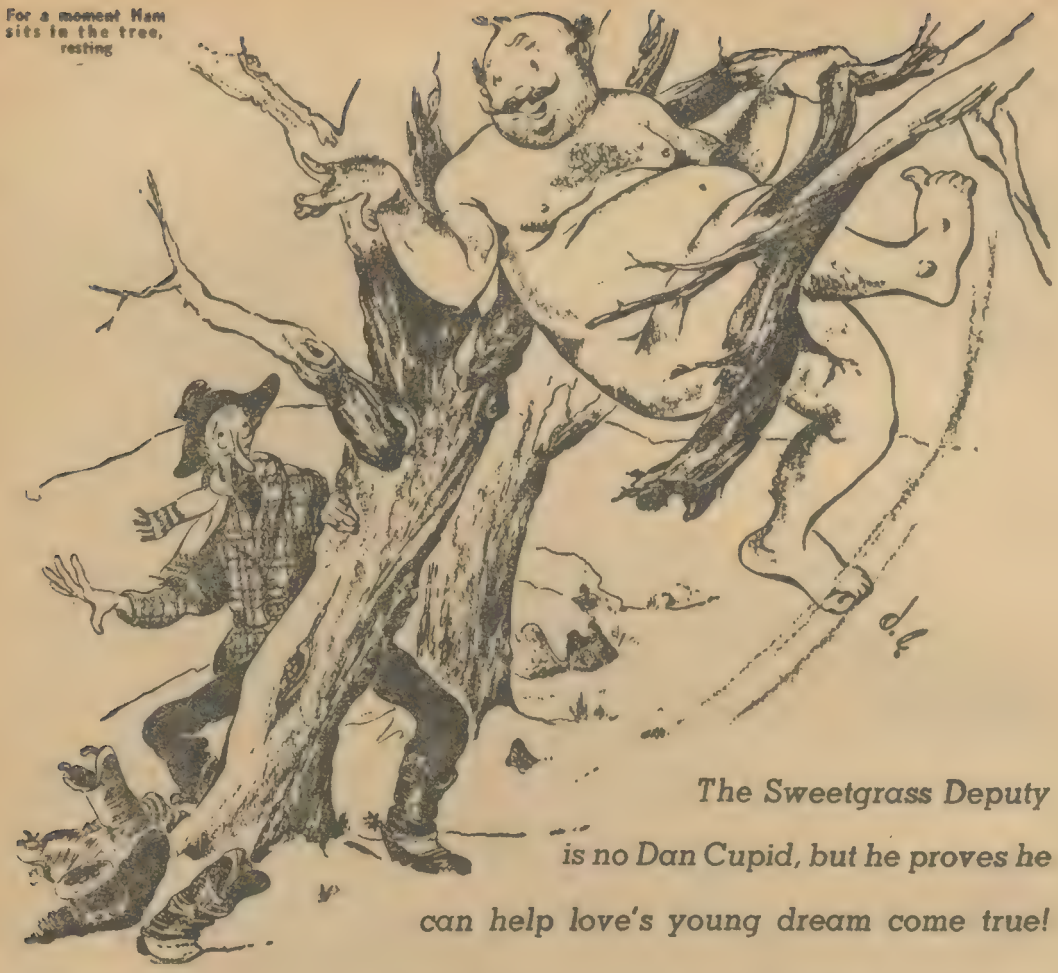
"Not now," said the sheriff. "But it sure will be soon. The new spur line of the railroad will run right across your property when it is built. Mitchell wanted to get the ranch before you found out about that. Shucks, when that was known anyone would have loaned you a thousand dollars to finish paying off that mortgage." Campbell grinned. "I'd have done it myself, Tom, figuring you could pay back twice what I loaned you."

"So that's it," said Hamlin. "Mitchell's bunch sure fell for that stuff about me having fifty thousand from that bank job I never committed hidden away. Maybe Boyd didn't believe it but the rest did."

"I hoped they would," said the sheriff. "That's why I played along with you."

"Funny," said Hamlin. "It must have cost Mitchell an extra thousand to have Warrick buy my cattle. Warrick never would have turned over the money that he got from the stage robbery to me otherwise."

"Uh-huh." Sheriff Campbell grinned. "Like you said, 'A fool and his money are soon parted!'"



For a moment Ham sits in the tree, resting

The Sweetgrass Deputy is no Dan Cupid, but he proves he can help love's young dream come true!

Ham's Ghastly Error

By ALFRED L. GARRY

MY DEPUTY, Ham, measures out a charge of powder, pours it into the 10-gauge brass goose-gun case, adds a dollop for good measure, and tops it off with a palm full of number 3 shot.

"Lay off the powder," I caution. "That goose gun kicks like an army mule without building up the charge. What's the idear?"

"I'm gettin' us some snow geese," Ham grunts. "Need the range."

"They'll decoy into easy range down at the slough."

"I ain't huntin' at the slough." Ham informs me. "I'm gettin' the geese in Brad McMillian's oat field."

"Then why all the double-loaded shells?" I persist. "It ain't cold enough yet to freeze the geese. We can't eat more

than a couple."

"I ain't huntin' for the pot." Ham wads his last shell. "We been sleepin' in soogans here just like we were roving cowpunchers. I aim to have me a shore enough goose-down feather-bed come winter. I'll get myself a heap of nice dry feathers in Brad's oat field."

"And you'll also let Superstitious Parker know you're around so he won't crowd Brad until the court has decided the legal division of their Dab Creek Valley range." I nod approval. "Well, while you're at it, pard, shoot me a feather tick too."

"So you jaspers ain't satisfied with feather beddin' all day, you now want to sleep in one!"

We jerk up. Speak of the devil! Grinning sardonic in the doorway is old "Super," for "superstitious," Parker. Hold on—Super Parker ain't so old. It's just his tightwad getup that makes him look old. A desert rat's a Beau Brummel alongside of Super.

His greasy sweat-stained sombrero is stiffened by a piece of haywire. His shirt is patched and faded, with great salt-crusted circles under the arms. A big Injun charm hangs by a grimy thong about his dirt seamed neck. Some grubliner must have left them levis behind. They're all torn, showing dirty gray underwear. His runover boots are pulling apart at the seams.

But with all his trap get-up, Super Parker's guns and cartridge belt would do credit to a soldier in a spit-and-polish regiment. His right newish guns are swung low in well oiled holsters. The gleaming shells in his belt glint in the sun as though they've been polished. It's a warpath outfit!

"Brad McMillian's talkin' big about how he's goin' to force a different division of Dab Creek Valley." Super growls. "Says he's goin' to court."

"I know what he says!" Ham clips, trying to pin down Super's little piggish eyes. "He says that if the lower court doesn't decide the land suit in his favor, he's goin' to appeal to a higher court!"

HAM levels a stern trigger finger at Super, and barks, "Yore squabble's goin' to be settled in law court! Understand! No gunplay!"

"He can't win!" Super challenges. "Why just yesterday I found a whole field of four-leaf clover on the part I'm claimin'! If the courts go against me, I'll—"

"You'll like it!" I snap. "And you'll keep your herds out of Brad's cultivated range until his last appeal has been heard. I'm warning you, Superstitious, if any of your cattle get into his winter hay range, we'll shove 'em out so fast it'll take you five years to put back the tallow on 'em!"

"When his dad and me was pardners, we always shared equal."

"Yep, we know!" Ham cuts him short. "You were pardners. But old man McMillian disappeared while the two of yuh were swimmin' a herd across the lower Yellowstone. I ain't makin' no accusation. But, I'd shore hate to ride the river with you!"

"Aw, now fellers, here we are gettin' all het up!" Super grins lopsided. "Got to go. Someone give me a chew."

I pass Super my darned near new plug of eatin' tobacco. He pops it way into his mouth. His teeth clamp like a blacksmith's power shears. He hands me back what's left of my plug. About a poor half. Before I can yelp, Super's outside.

"Look, chump!" Ham grins, pointing out the window.

Before he reaches for the jerk knot of his fleabitten nag, Super takes out the acre of my tobacco he's crammed in his mouth. He wipes it on his sleeve, takes an ordinary sized chew, and pockets the rest! The tightwad's promoted his day's chewing.

Suddenly what I see gives me a queer feeling in my stomach. Instinctively, I lift my guns in their holsters and drop 'em gently back so's they'll be free an' loose. Gunplay's in the making!

You see, Brad McMillian's dad and Superstitious Parker owned Dab Creek Valley together. When Brad returned from school after his father was drowned while swimming a herd with Super, he found he'd been dealt one off the bottom of the deck. Old man McMillian and Super had an agreement that if they ever had a falling out, they would divide Dab Valley between them fifty-fifty.

"I ain't takin' no more pardnership," Parker tells Brad bluntly. "So I've divided Dab Valley and throwed a fence across. I'm takin' the south half."

"That's unfair!" Brad protests. "You're taking the lower end of the valley with all the good flat grazing land. You're sawing off the rough upland on me. That's not at all what was meant by your agreement with Dad. Dad always told me the valley was to be split along the creek from source to mouth. Each would take his share of up and low land. Why, you're hogging all the good land!"

"Listen here, you young whippersnapper!" Super blares. "Don't go callin' me no hog! You got half the acreage. So what? I got possession of the lower valley! Shut up! Get out of my sight before I take a poke at you!"

"I might do some poking myself!" Brad snaps, his eyes blazing.

"Yeah!"

Parker lashes a sudden clubbing blow at Brad's head. Brad lithely ducks, backs a step, feints gangling awkward Parker off balance, and whips across his right. Super's head jerks back, his mouth pops open, and his eyes glaze. Brad loops his left. Parker's knees sag. He falls forward on his face, out colder than a frozen fish.

The next day Super throws away his old shot-out forty-five, and buys himself a brace of brand new Colts. He talks big as how Brad's going to stop lead if he don't quit beefing about the division of Dab Creek Valley. He's plumb aiming to goad the lad into stacking triggers. Super's throwed plenty lead in his day. Brad don't stand a chance.

That's why my stomach gets them butterflies. For walking down the sidewalk toward Parker is Brand McMillian and Betty Tilton. Brad hasn't seen Parker, who's ambushed beside his cayuse. Brad's too absorbed looking into the laughing eyes of Betty. Them two youngsters have been keeping company since school days. I haven't ever seen them that they weren't laughing and chuckling together like they had a million happy secrets.

AS THEY pass Super Parker's horse, he jets a stream of tobacco juice on the plank sidewalk, splashing it over Brad's boot. Brad, his face livid with rage, swings Betty out of harm's way. Furiously he whirls on Parker.

Super's in his gun crouch, grimy hands clawed above his walnut.

"Want to make somethin' out of it?" he snarls.

"Why, Superstitious, I didn't know you'd pick a fight on Friday, the thirteenth!"

It's Betty's voice. Sharp and incisive.

Super jerks a startled questioning look at her. His quivering butt-hovering hands drop. In that second, before Parker realizes he's been tricked, Brad hurtles off the sidewalk. His rage driven fist lashes out. Even in our office, we hear the sodden impact as his knuckles smash Super's hawk nose flat.

Parker reels back, gun clawing. Ham catapults out of the office, flattens Brad with a mighty shove, and smothers Super's rising gun arm before he can slip a shot.

"None of that!" Ham barks, roughly twisting the gun from Super's hand. "Easy, or 'll pistol whip the whey out of yuh! Yuh're under arrest, Parker, for violatin' Sweetgrass City Ordinance Number Five-forty-six, havin' to do with ex—expec—aw, spittin' on the sidewalk!"

After Judge Mirander fines Super, who kicks like a bay steer, five bucks for spitting on the sidewalk, Ham turns Parker over to the vet to have his lopsided nose patched. That greedy superstitious no-good's going to be breathing through his mouth for a long time.

Ham hotfoots it back to Freddie's and braces Judge Mirander.

"Divvy up!" Ham rubs his forefinger and thumb together suggestively. "Shell out my half."

"What do you mean, sir?" Judge Mirander draws himself up legal dignified.

"Yuh know darned well Sweetgrass ain't got no law against sidewalk spittin'." Ham grins. "Come now. Yuh ain't turned in that fine. Give me my half!"

Ham buys powder and shot for the goose-gun with his share of the fine, loading every shell case we got. Soon he's bringing home snow geese, dry picking them, and storing the feathers in old flour sacks.

We eat goose stewed, fried, baked, fricasseed, broiled, and boiled, until I'm ready to honk. Ham cooks goose more ways than Oscar of the Walled-off ever thought of. But no matter how he cooks it, it's still goose. Even the prisoners in the jailhouse threaten to revolt if they are served any more goose. They say Ham's violating their Constitutional right against

cruel and unusual punishment.

I commence to think that maybe all this goose eating is going to Ham's head instead of his bulging middle. I catch him rummaging in my desk. He finally finds where I've cached my carton of plug eating tobacco. He filches two plugs.

One plug he puts in his mouth different ways. Frowning with concentration, Ham carefully measures with a ruler the marks his teeth make. Like a surveyor making a map, he transfers the measurements to the other plug, making little nicks with his knife.

Ham carefully wraps the marked plug in a piece of newspaper and hotfoots out the door. I skulk right after him. Ham's got a brainstorm. One of these days one of Ham's brainstorms is going to blow my pardner right into the middle of kingdom come.

Ham beelines for the blacksmith shop. Him and old toothless Oliver Newton, the blacksmith, talk serious for a minute. Then Newton's face lights up in a wide grin. He commences to cackle, smacking the thigh of his leather apron and clapping Ham on the back in his glee.

Ham takes out that marked up plug of tobacco. Ham and Old Newton go to the drill press and commence drilling holes in it. They are as careful as a machinest fitting a steam engine cylinder head. I'm just about to bust in on them to find out what all the fun is about when I look at my watch. Golly!

I've got to beat it. The circuit court is sitting. Today they're hearing Brad's case against Superstitious Parker's land grab. I got to be there early to prevent them two from stacking triggers. In fact, just to be on the safe side, I make everyone coming into that courthouse shuck their irons and check 'em with the clerk of the court.

BRAD comes in with Judge Mirander, his attorney, and I sit with them. Super Parker's too tight to hire a lawyer. He's spread word around that he's had two Injun omens and one confirmation from his horror-scope, whatever that is, that he's got a open and shut case. There ain't no need for him to spend money for a mouthpiece.

Ham comes in late, looks around the courtroom. He spots Betty Tilton, catches her eye, and winks. She winks right back, her face lighting up with a mischievous smile. Ham wedges himself into a seat right alongside of Super Parker. Parker's naturally kind of squirming nervous as we wait for the Butte judge to get up on the bench. Super takes out the makings, commences to build a smoke.

"No smokin'." Ham whispers, pointing to a new sign that must have been put up by this new circuit judge.

The jury is swore in quick. Brad gets up and states his case, producing his dad's copy of the agreement he had with Parker. The pardnership writing reads that in case of any disagreement, Dab Valley was to be divided fifty-fifty. Brad and Judge Mirander make a good spiel about how the equitable way the agreement was understood by both men was a division *along* Dab Creek. Each man was to share the good and bad land on his side of the creek, from source to the mouth of the valley.

Super, acting as his own attorney, don't waste no time in springing his ace in the hole. He produces two of his hands for witnesses. They swear they heard Brad's dad say many times that he wanted the upper end of the valley because of the magnificent view. Super hammers that point home to the jury, and clinches it by pointing out that Mr. McMillian built his home high in the upper valley.

Then he turns his witnesses over to Judge Mirander for cross-examination. But Mirander ain't able to shake their story. Super, who's lied his mouth dry, goes over to the water pitcher, drinks, and then takes his seat beside Ham. Nervously he absent-mindedly commences to roll another smoke. Ham taps his shoulder, and again points to the no smoking sign.

Ham fishes in his pocket, squirming to one side as though he don't want Super to see what he's doing. My pardner slyly palms the new plug of tobacco and worries off a small chew. Tobacco hungry Super spots the plug. Like a begging Siwash, he reaches for it. Out of habit, the darned cadger greedily pushes a corner way in his mouth. His teeth come together like a clamshell bucket. He hands back to Ham what little's left of his plug.

Turning away from Ham, Parker takes the whoppering bite of tobacco from his mouth, bites off a normal man-sized chew, and pockets the profit—enough to last him

all day. As his lantern jaw commences to work on the tobacco like a cow relishing it's cud, I happen to notice Betty Tilton. Instead of paying attention to Judge Mirander's sharp attempt to cross up them two perjuring witnesses, she has her eyes glued on Super.

I snap a look at Super, just in time to see a queer puzzled expression seep over his face. Suddenly he spits out the tobacco with a startling agonized bellow. Parker leaps wildly toward the water pitcher. Yammering and hop-dancing like a greedy Injun with a mouthful of hot potato, he upends the pitcher. Water cascades from his open mouth, drops off his chin like a waterfall, and sops his shirt front. Again and again she sluices out his mouth.

He turns angrily to the crowd, which is laughing fit to kill. He can't talk words. Super babbles something, pointing frantically at his mouth. His jaw commences to chatter open and shut like a telegrapher's instrument. His tear streaming eyes pop out like a doodle bug's. Then Parker's face commences to screw up, making awful faces that'd scare a school kid into hysterics. Gales of laughter sweep the room.

The judge hammers frantic for order. Which he don't get. The more Super Parker tries to rinse out his mouth, the worse his frantic antics become.

"Mr. Parker, stop making a scene in this court!" the judge snaps. "Continue your case."

SUPER pulls himself together. He walks dignified toward the judge to make his final plea. But he don't get past, "Yore Honor." Parker's voice goes husky. The words sound as though he's got a mouthful of hot mush. He fans air into his gaping mouth with his hand. His tongue runs out like a drothed steer.

Super commences to froth at the mouth!

"Water! Water!" he wails thickly.

A woman's scream pierces the room's laughter. It's Betty. She's standing on her chair shrieking loud and frantic enough to put a Commanche to shame.

"Hydrophobia!" she screeches. "He's mad! Rabid! Run for your lives!"

Folks rush, panic stricken, for the doors.

"Case set over to the next term of the court!" the Judge yelps over his shoulder as he joins the exit stampede.

Ham leaps on Super, wrastles him to the floor, and slips the cuffs on him.

"Here, you fellers," Ham barks to the two hardcase hands who have been his perjuring witnesses. "Take yore boss out to the hoss trough and the three of yuh wash out yore lying mouths!"

Ham clamps after the three. As soon as Super gets his mouth sluiced out, Ham turns to his two hardbitten hands. Ham, frowning furiously, gives them the lawman's frosty eye. From head to toe he slowly reads their brandmarks.

"Don't you hairpins go leavin' town until I thumb through my reward posters!" he growls, ominous as a railroad dick browbeating a bum.

Ham don't no more than get around the corner before them two jaspers put the bite on Super Parker for some dinero and slope furtive for their broncs. Sundown's going to find 'em well on their way to distant parts.

"Ham," I say casual, "I forgot my eatin' tobacco. Give me a chew.

"Ain't got none." Ham lies faster than a hoss can trot.

"Hand it over!" I clip.

Sheepish as a cattleman caught eating lamb, my pardner digs in his chaps pocket. He passes me what's left of the plug he handed Superstitious. I make as though to take a whoopering chew.

"Don't!" Ham yelps, knocking the plug away from my mouth.

I hogtie Ham's eye, which has gone shifty as a moonbeam on quick water.

"Come clean, Pard!" I says with a grin. "I saw you and old Oliver Newton working on this tobacco!"

Ham, grinning like a schoolkid who's slipped a mouse in the schoolma'am's desk, takes the plug from me. With his stock knife he scrapes the edge, prying out three little tobacco stoppers from the holes he'd drilled. Out of the first he pours a red powder.

"Red pepper!" He chuckles. "It shore made Super beeline for the water pitcher."

From the next hole he pours a fine white powder.

"Bitter alum. That's what made his face screw up so darned comical!"

"What's in the third hole!" I ask.

"Strychnine, I hope!"

"Nope!" Ham's laugh rumbles deep. "It was Miss Betty's idear. Some of her shampoo soap powder. Frothed up mighty nice so's she could give the crowd that hydrophobia scare and bust up the trial!"

"Thought she had a hand in it." I chuckle. "But outside of curing Super Parker of his tobacco cadging habit, where does it get you? Brad and Super will have to try their case over again at the spring term of the court."

Ham nods. "Yep. But, we've made Super tip his mitt. He sprung them phony witnesses as his ace in the hole. I'll bet they won't stop runnin' until they've swum the Rio!"

THE next time Betty Tilton is in town, I see Ham's eyes follow her as she makes the rounds of the stores. When she goes into the Sweetgrass General Store and Emporium, Ham hotfoots it over there.

"Miss Betty," he says raising his hat polite, "An old bach like me sometimes needs the advice of a woman.

"Anything," Betty says, and smiles.

"I got enough goose down to make a couple of feather beds." Ham explains. "I'd like to have yuh help me pick out the ticking."

"Certainly, Ham." Betty's always pleased to help a friend.

After they purchase the ticking, Ham observes with a dolefully pitiful whine in his voice, "Now I'd better buy some needles and a couple of miles of thread. Them ticks got to be sewed extra good. It'll take me quite a spell before I finish."

"Why spring'll be here before a thumb-fingered bach like you could sew up the feather beds by hand!" Betty laughs. "Here, I'll take the goods home and run up the ticks on my sewing machine."

"Thanks a million!" Ham's grin is mighty self-satisfied as his little scheme works.

"But don't think you euchred me into anything, Foxy Grandpa!" Betty sweetly wipes the smirk off Ham's face with a gale of good natured laughter. "You old fraud, you!" Her voice imitates Ham's as she mimics, "'A couple of miles of thread!' Come on. For trying to pull a shenanigan like that you can buy me an ice cream soda."

They're heading for the drug store soda fountain when Super Parker lurches out of Freddie's bar. He sees them, and his face gets thunderous.

"Ham," he bellows, "What did you do to my two hands? They pulled their freight as though the Molly Maguires was after 'em!"

"Oh, nothin' much," Ham answers as oily as a new rawhide catch rope. "They gave false testimony about old man McMillian wanting the worthless upper valley yuh're trying' to saw off on young Brad. I figgered any jaspers who'd sell their oath would steal cattle, and that they were wanted men. Must have been right. They shore fanned their tails out of these parts."

"Why don't you and Brad settle your trouble out of court." Betty appeals to Parker. "Split fair, man."

"I'll do no such thing!" Superstitious blares rudely. "I got possession of that lower valley. Possession! That's nine points in the law!"

"That's no way to talk to a lady!" Ham snaps, getting hot under the collar.

"You keep your nose out of this!" Parker whirls savagely on Ham. "Keep it out, or I'll knock it off!"

"Sez you!" Ham snaps. "You, and who else!"

"Me!" Parker roars. "Unpin that tin star, you sawed-off buttinsky! I'll show you!"

Ham rips the cloth of his vest in his eagerness to shuck his star. He unbelts his gun. Parker does likewise. Their fists saw the air as they circle and duck like a couple of fighting cocks. Parker loops over a sledgehammer swing that catches Ham square on the top of the head. Super should have known better. He jumps back, shaking his hand and rubbing the knuckles he's busted on Ham's noggin.

Ham backs up, his fists commence to pump back and forth like locomotive pistons. He digs in his toes like a sprinter, and is all set to climb Super's lanky frame when suddenly Betty's clear voice rings out.

Pointing at something at Parker's feet, she chants, "See a pin and pick it up, and all the day you'll have good luck!"

Fearlessly, Betty steps between the men. She places a restraining hand on Ham's heaving chest. With the trigger

finger of her other hand, she's pointing to a large fancy-headed pin at Super's feet. Parker swoops, eagerly picks up the pin. Happy as a kid with a new all day sucker, the superstitious idiot forgets all about his peeve. Ham's right cocks way back for a sneaker. But Betty stops him with a flash of her eye and a quick shake of her head.

"Thanks, Miss," Superstitious Parker says, raising his battered hat polite. "Most folks don't set no store by omens, charms, supernatural ghosts, and such. But I do. Take today. Didn't know whether to sell my beef herd or not. This pin decides me. You watch. It's my lucky day. I'll sell, and tomorrow the price of beef's shore to drop!"

"Come on and fight!" Ham challenges.

"Later!"

SUPER turns on his heel, swoops up his dropped gunbelts, and legs it at a high lope in the direction of the cattle buyer's office.

"Superstition rides that jasper worse than a Hopi medicine man!" Betty observes, again taking Ham's arm and steering him toward the soda fountain. A frown plays over her pretty face. "It's just too bad he's got possession of that lower valley. He's right. Possession is nine points in the law. Even if you did run off Parker's perjuring witnesses, Ham, I'm afraid Brad's got an awful uphill fight to force a fair division of the Dab Creek Valley range."

"Yep, yep," Ham growls. "Yuh just saved that hairpin from a good knucklin'. And, young lady, don't yuh think for a minute yuh pulled any wool over my eyes. The duplicate of the pin yuh slyly throwed at Parker's feet is still in yore scarf!"

"You men!" Betty shakes Ham's arm playful. "You got to try to settle everything by pitched battles. We out-foxed Super Parker at the trial by playing on his greed for tobacco, didn't we? Well now, let's get our heads together. I don't want to marry a rancher who'll beat his heart out trying to make a living for me on a worthless range. We got to make Super Parker divide Dab Creek Valley fairly."

"Darn it, Betty, yuh're a gal to ride the river with!" Ham ejaculates warmly. "Brad's a lucky feller."

"Talking about riding the river, Ham," Betty's face gets wooden. "Did it ever occur to you that there were no witnesses when Brad's father was drowned swimming that herd across the lower Yellowstone with his partner, Superstitious Parker!"

* * * * *

Winter in Montaner is a time of cribbage around a hot stove, and laying in my fine warm feather bed until all hours in the morning. Lawing is at a minimum. But Ham ain't hibernating. He's more full of vim and vigor than a Mexican jumping bean.

My pardner's got a iron turning bar rigged across the kitchen doorway. He hurtles out of his feather bed, makes a flying leap for the turning bar, chins himself until he's red in the face, skins the cat, hangs by his knees, and finishes off with a floor shaking dead man's drop.

"Some day, pard," I admonish, "You're going to miss that dead man's drop and punch a hole clear through the floor with your cranium! Why all this circus acrobat ambition?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell yuh no lies!" Ham smart alecks, stripping off his red flannels.

Bare as the day he was born, Ham rockets out the kitchen door, piles into a snowdrift, plunges around like a bogged down bull, beats his chest with handfuls of snow, and then charges back into the house. His body glows red as a fireman's hat.

"You'll catch your death of cold!" I scold.

"Bah!" Ham snorts, "I'm hardening my body against the weather."

"Well, if you're so all-fired weather brave, why don't you take that five-gallon can of liquid coal tar and patch the jailhouse roof." I suggest. "The winter winds have raised hob with the tar paper. Come the chinook rains, the prisoners are going to be mighty mad unless we get that roof fixed."

"Might do it at that." Ham agrees. "I got use for the empty tar can."

Ham warms the liquid coal tar, lugs it to the jail roof, and sops the sticky tar over the leaky seams. He comes back to the kitchen, blowing on his frost-nipped fin-

gers. "About a gallon of tar left," Ham hefts the can. "Have you got something I can put it in?"

"Just throwed out a empty molasses jug," I tell Ham.

Ham pours the remaining tar into the molasses jug, takes the empty tar can out into the back yard, and burns it out clean.

"What you aiming to cook in that can?" I ask.

"Nothin'." Ham remarks, putting a look on his face he thinks is guileless.

IT'S about as disarming as the expression on the face of a hungry lobo sighting a new dropped calf. I've knowed Ham, man and boy, for almost forty years. When he gets that phony innocent look on his fat face, I know something is agitating the guyro in his noggin. It's time for me to fresh load my six-guns and hover in Ham's background like a guarding angel.

Now folks, what I'm going to tell you is doggone hard to believe. I ain't here to run down the character of my pardner. And don't you-all think any the less of him for what I'm about to tell you. After all, Ham's took the rough off a lot of wild broncs in his day. The spine jolting may have addled his brains. I think I should have seen all this coming from the way Ham took to hardening up his body by rolling in the snow bare naked.

Ham fixes a wire bale in that five-gallon tar can, mounts up, and racks out of town. I skulk right after him. Betty Tilton is waiting for him at the bridge. They unmount, ground tie their broncs, and sit on a log by the river, their heads together like a couple of generals planning a battle.

Then they part, Ham riding on out to the old deserted Golden Horn mine. He rummages around, finds a rusty length of rough-lock chain, puts it in a grain sack, and lashes it behind his saddle. Ham then goes into the mine, and in a few moments comes out with an armload of wet, rotten, fungus covered wood from the props of the musty damp lower level.

Ham puts the rotten wood in the cleaned tar can, adds some water, and hangs it over the fire. Phew! The dank earthy smell that rises from that boiling wood is terrible. It'd chase a dog off a slaughter house wagon. When it's stewed long enough, Ham pours the concentrated stench liquor into an empty beer bottle.

Then Ham rides over to an oak grove on the river flats. There's a stiff north breeze blowing. But that don't make no difference to my halt-brained pardner. He unmounts, shucks off his mackinaw, chaps, levis, shirt, and even his underwear. Clad only in his birthday suit, Ham makes a run toward a small oak.

My pardner grabs a low branch like a turning bar, twists himself into the leafless tree. For a moment Ham sits there, resting. Then like a long-armed monkey, Ham commences to swing from branch to branch in long flying arcs. Like that hairpin on the flying trapeze, Ham travels through the air with the greatest of ease. He monkey-frolics among the tree tops for an hour or so, then swings to the ground, glistening with sweat in spite of the winter cold. The dub is shore to catch his death of cold!

I'm right as rain too! That evening Ham commences to sneeze. By morning he's got a fine head cold. I don't chide him none. He ain't cutting all them monkeyshines for nothing. I don't want to tip my mitt that I'm hep he's up to something.

Besides, I soon get something else to think about. Brad McMillian slumps into my office, crestfallen as a whipped dog. He slouches in my chair, his feet stretched out, and his hat tipped forward to hide the lackluster licked expression in his pathetic eyes. He's plumb throwed!

I just pat him friendly on the back, not trying to pry into his affairs. I pretend to be busy with paper work.

Finally, Brad lifts his miserable face to me, and with a catch in his voice that's almost a sob, he says, "Egg, she's gone over to him!"

"Who? What do you mean, son?"

"Betty!" Brad's pent up misery gushes out. "Two evenings last week Betty called on Superstitious Parker! Stayed until after ten. We're practically engaged. She hasn't said a word to me about it! Can—can she be two-timing me?"

"Nonsense!" I dismiss. "Betty wouldn't have anything to do with Super Parker. Unless—"

I BITE my tongue, change my talk, and ease Brad out of the office. At sundown I skulk up behind Super Parker's

tumble down ranch house, which is set in a grove of leafless live oaks.

Shore enough, not long after, Betty Tilton rides up. As she unmounts, Parker's door opens, and I see them greet friendly, too darned friendly, and pass into the house. It's after ten before she comes out again. Parker stands framed in the doorway as Betty rides over the hill toward home in the full moonlight.

I sniff. Seeping down wind is a rank musty smell. Like a long closed basement. It gets stronger, more fetid, like the windward side of an Injun tree burial. Something long dead has been disturbed. Funny too, I've smelled that stench someplace before.

Then I hear it plain. My sparse hair rises up on end stiffer than hog bristles. A long low moan. Below, Parker hears it too. He reopens the half closed door, and steps puzzled-like out on the porch.

The uncanny sound comes clearer. Clear enough to know it ain't no wind swirling in a canyon eddy. It's a wail. Far off, ending in a demoniacal shriek. A chain clanks. The banshee moans coming closer. I think I can make out a word. I can!

"Rope!"

I'm shore of it! Rising and falling, now loud, now fading to an ear straining whisper, there's no misunderstanding the words that weave themselves into the wierd keening.

"Rope! Throw—me—a—rope!"

Super Parker stands as a man frozen on the porch. The dismal lamenting comes nearer and nearer. It suddenly changes to a scream of horror, followed by a loud gurgling gasp. All the time that dank dead smell gets stronger and stronger.

I see it off to the left. First just a white fog-like shimmer. Something is floating among the leafless live oaks. Undulating in the cold glittering moonlight, it sweeps spectrally from tree to tree. It moans. Gasping hoarse, like a man desperately fighting fast water for his breath.

Over and over it screams, "Rope! Throw—me—your—rope!"

Super Parker sees the ghost. Panic-stricken, he edges toward the door, as though to flee. Then he whirls, rushes to the edge of the porch. Six-guns blasting in both hands, Super Parker shakes out ten swift loads at the ghastly white phantom. Unharmed, the ghost sweeps closer.

"Rope! Parker—why—didn't—yuh—throw—me—your—rope?"

Super crashes through the doorway, emerges with his shotgun. He blasts both barrels. Still, the white glistening specter bears down upon him unscathed!

"Parker, yuh let me drown!" the ghost gurgles in breath fighting gasps. "I'm hauntin' yuh here on my range until the end of your days!"

Parker thumbs frantic shells into his hip guns. He blasts. The shimmering white ghost ain't fazed. It raises a spectral hand in the moonlight, pointing to the south.

"Murderer! Go!"

The ghost vanishes. Only that rank stench is left. With a horrified sobbing bellow, Superstitious Parker bolts for the door, just as there's the sound of a hard-spurred bronc sweeping into the ranch yard.

"Parker! Parker, what's all the shooting about?"

It's Betty Tilton. She unmounts, runs to the door, and vanishes inside of the house. I Injun up to a window. Parker has just finished a whopper slug of Dutch courage. He's badly spooked, and seems to welcome Betty's return.

"What was the shooting about?" Betty's voice is tinged with anxiety.

"I—I sort'a changed my mind," Parker mumbles, taking another quick swig. "I—I was just signalin'. Thought you'd hear the shots and come back. I—I'll sell!"

"I'm not so sure I want to buy now." Betty frowns. "You know, Parker, you haven't got a clear title to this lower valley. There's the matter of Brad's lawsuit coming up next month. I've got two thousand dollars with me. That's all I'll give you for a quit claim deed to all of your rights to any and all land in Dab Creek Valley. Upper, or lower!"

"Make it twenty-five hundred," Parker weakly attempts to bargain.

"Two thousand!" Betty snaps, turning toward the door. "Take it or leave it!"

"Okay. You know how to write a quit claim deed?" Super caves in. "I—I'm kind of anxious to leave the country."

BETTY quickly writes the deed. Parker dashes off his signature. He counts the money, puts it in his pocket,

and extends his hand to Betty.

Their hands just touch when the door crashes open. Framed in the doorway is Brad McMillian. His eyes are blazing jealous hate. His mercurial temper seethes over as he sees the girl he loves and the man he hates holding hands.

"A fine thing, Betty!" he rants. "Well, you can have the wealthy rat! But I'm putting my mark on him first!"

He springs. His fists smash savagely at the startled man's face. Parker reels back, falls. He claws out his Colt just as the berserk Brad kicks frantically at his gun arm. The gun blasts. Brad staggers, both hands clutching below his heart.

From the window, I snap a quick shot. My slug smashes the rising gun from Parker's grasp, just as Betty splinters a chair over his head. I'm in the room and got him covered before he gets the cobwebs shaken from his noggin.

Brad is slumped in a chair, the color of ashes, gasping for breath. He's still clutching himself under the heart.

"He's bad hit!" I command Betty. "Ride for a doctor!"

"No need, Egg!" She attempts a shaky laugh. "Brad'll be all right as soon as he gets his wind!"

"What?"

Betty stoops, picks up Parker's gun, swings open the loading gate, and ejects a loaded shell.

"Bite the lead!" she grins, handing it to me.

Feeling plumb foolish, I bite the lead.

"Beeswax!"

"Certainly." Betty nods. "I pulled the stingers out of all Super Parker's guns while he was out doing his chores. Replaced them with these beeswax slugged shell. Didn't want him hurting a—a very good friend of ours!"

"A friend of ours, eh!"

I know now where that awful dead smell was cooked up. Something's rotten in Sweetgrass when a feller don't let his pardner in on his monkeyshines!

"Mister," I whirled on Parker. "You're no man to ride the river with! Know what I mean? Beat it! If you're ever seen in Sweetgrass County after tonight, I'll personally shoot you sick!"

Brad's completely bewildered as Superstitious Parker bolts for the door, mounts up, and fogs off in the night.

"What's this all about?" he asks.

"Just that if you'll put your arms around Betty and say the right words, Brad, the difficulty over the ownership of Dab Valley will be forever settled!"

I leave them two swell kids explaining things in each other's arms and rack back home. I put up my bronc, and open the kitchen door. It's a mess. On the floor slashed open is one of our goose feather ticks. Feathers lie about the floor like snow.

The wash tub is heating on the stove. Huddled over the cherry red stove is Ham. He's sniffing camphor vapor for his head cold. He smiles sheepishly at me.

"Help me set down the wash tub, Egg." He says. "I got to take a all over bath before I can turn in."

Ham peels off his clothes. He's snow white. Ghastly, shimmering white! His skin is plastered with snow goose feathers!

"Don't tell me!" I hold up my hand as he commences to unfold his tale. "I was there. You made a fine ghost! That foul smell and all worked swell! Superstitious Parker has sold for a song and pulled his freight! If I don't miss my guess, all of Dab Valley will be under one ownership by sundown tonight!"

"Most likely them kids will want me to be best man," Ham beams. "I'll just wash off the molasses I got these feathers stuck on with. Then I'll go buy them kids a present."

"What molasses?" I want to know. "We ain't got a drop in the house?"

"My smeller's haywire." Ham sniffs, pointing to a jug. "What's that?"

"Roof tar!" I snicker. "You poured it into that molasses jug yourself!"

"*Awak!*" Ham gulps. "Gosh! I've gone and tarred and feathered myself!"

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

THE FLETCHER KID

An Exciting Novelet by WALT COBURN

The Mexican Cossack

For twenty years, under Porfirio Diaz, Colonel Kosterlitzky and his Rurales were the scourge of Mexico's rebels, whom they executed in droves!

With Kosterlitzky leading them, the Rurales thundered through Nogales

HIS name is still spoken in hushed voices by the old ones, a name that was once uttered with foreboding, or hope, or hate-prodded profanity; but never with contempt. For he was a warrior without fear, this one they called the Mexican Cossack.

Talk to the old *amigos* along the Sonora-Arizona line and they will tell you that Colonel Kosterlitzky was gigantic. Big as a Brahma bull, they describe him in Spanish, standing seven feet tall without boots or sombrero; a fierce, merciless man who seldom smiled. Actually the colonel weighed 180 pounds, was 6 feet 2 inches tall and had steely blue eyes. He possessed a high degree of daring, a natural talent for leadership and an inherent passion for conflict. He was also a *muy pronto hombre* with a gun.

George H. Smalley, former newspaperman who served as secretary to Governor

A True Story by LESLIE ERNENWEIN

Brodie of Arizona Territory, tells of an incident which fittingly describes Kosterlitzky's reputation for dispensing swift and final judgment to wrong-doers.

"That was way back in Eighteen-Ninety-seven," Smalley relates. "The colonel and I were having a drink in a cantina at Magdalena, Sonora. He spoke English fluently and was telling me about an experience in the cavalry when gunblasts outside interrupted him."

Excusing himself, Kosterlitzky strode quickly outside and the bartender followed him to the doorway. "One dead man lying in the dust," the drink dispenser reported.

Then there was the sound of another shot, and the bartender announced: "Two dead men in the dust!"

Kosterlitzky came back into the cantina, resumed his chair at the table and ordered a fresh round of *tequila*. "He picked up the conversation exactly where it had been been interrupted," Smalley recalls, "and made no mention of the man he had just killed."

He Deserts U. S. Cavalry

Although there are conflicting stories as to why Emile Kosterlitzky left Russia, it is an established fact that he joined the United States Army, served in the Sixth Cavalry at Fort Apache and then "went over the hill" to Mexico where he became a colonel in command of the flying column of cavalry known as the *Cordada*.

Kosterlitzky, whose exploits spawned fantastic legends on both sides of the border, was typical of "the-man-on-horseback" tradition. Because he carried a sword and wore his hair clipped Russian style, Kosterlitzky was called "The Mexican Cossack." A strict disciplinarian with a streak of cruelty that was close to outright savagery, the Tartar-turned-Mexican-soldier gave no quarter and requested none. He reigned at the most tumultuous time in border history. The outlaw riffraff of a continent had congregated along the Arizona-Sonora line, turning cowcamps into helltowns, smuggling cattle, Chinese, dope and all manner of contraband across the border. It was a veritable carnival of crime, with Mexican bandit and American badman collaborating in mutual benefit.

Scarcely a day passed without upwards of a dozen blood-spattered bodies sprawling on puncheon floors of cantinas or in the dust of back alleys in Agua Prieta, Douglas, Naco or Nogales. Life was cheap on both sides of the border at the turn of the century. And death was cheaper.

It was also a time of great political strife in Mexico with the enemies of Porfirio Diaz continuously plotting to overthrow his government. A time of two-tongued *jefe politicos* whose greedy fingers eagerly clutched bandit bribes and whose rapacious grafting took frijoles from the mouths of poor peons. To counteract the forces of insurrection, Colonel Kosterlitzky organized an elaborate system of espionage that enabled him to smash revolutions before the seed of rebellion had time to sprout.

By nipping off revolutions Kosterlitzky's *Cordada* became the strong right arm of Diaz and the colonel his most trusted officer. Little wonder then that Kosterlitzky was given command of the Guardia Rural, that hell-for-leather band of Mexican rangers which ruled Northern Mexico.

Thus Kosterlitzky achieved his high goal—the destiny for which all his hard riding and fierce fighting had fitted him. Only the president of Mexico was above him. And the president never interfered. The Rurales were supreme. Outranking the military and civil authorities, they held the fate of peon and politician in the palms of their gun-grabbing hands. Whereas Kosterlitzky had been called "The Cossack," he now became known as *Juez de Cordada*—Judge of the Roped Ones. His decisions were final, and although most historians agree that he was just as he was ruthless, his use of the firing squad often bordered on wholesale butchery. It is an ironic fact that many of the Rurales had been recruited by Diaz from captured gangs of bandits, a case of using thieves to catch thieves.

Constant Vigilance Saves Him

Hatred by hundreds who would have gladly shot him in the back or disemboweled him with a dagger, Kosterlitzky survived by using constant vigilance. Although reputed to be quite a ladies' man, the colonel was incredibly adept at side-

stepping death traps smilingly set by the sisters of intrigue. Warily refusing to let any man—including his own Rurales—get behind him, he sat always with his back to a wall.

Also he maintained a secret police force, chief of which was a Mexican named El Zorro, The Fox. This mysterious character was like a third eye to Kosterlitzky—an all-seeing eye. Disguised as a crippled beggar in the plaza, or a drunken *vaquero* in a cantina, El Zorro accomplished brilliant feats of espionage. Discovering plots against the life of his commander was a specialty with The Fox, and many would-be assassins faced Rural firing squads because of him.

Although shot at on countless occasions by vengeance-seeking relatives of Rural victims, or in pitched battles with bandit gangs, Colonel Kosterlitzky was never wounded, a fact which gave credence to the legend that this potentate of powder-smoke was himself bulletproof.

Upon special occasions the colonel rode in kingly fashion, occupying a Concord coach drawn by four horses and equipped with a Pullman-type bed. The baggage boot was invariably well stocked with choice liquors. A second coach, carrying luggage and an army surgeon, served as an emergency hospital. Flanked by frowning Rurales garbed in the charro finery of their dress uniforms, the colonel's coaches made an impressive procession. The tramp of many horses and the rumble of wheels was like the thunder of doom to smuggling peon and grafting politico.

Kosterlitzky's ruthless methods of maintaining law and order are a matter of record. On one occasion he "adobed walled" sixteen men, including the mayor of Fronteras, a judge and a chief of police, all of whom he found guilty of being implicated in the robbery of a Nacazorri mine payroll. The colonel was arresting officer, judge, jury and executioner. Under his reign the *fusilado* was more than a threat to wrong-doers in Sonora; it was an almost constant actuality.

Joe Pearce, who was an Arizona Ranger on the border and knew Kosterlitzky, gives a graphic comparison of Rural and Ranger justice: "We Rangers, under Captain Tom Rynning, were ordered to take prisoners whenever possible, instead of shooting them. But Kosterlitzky's men worked the opposite way. The Colonel carried a black book with the names of wanted men in it. Any time he and his Rurales caught up with a black book man it was all over but the shooting. If he lived to surrender they put him to digging his grave, then stood him up alongside it so he'd fall in when the firing squad opened up on him."

Diaz' Fall Dooms Kosterlitzky

But Kosterlitzky, who had been a scouraging tyrant to rapacious politicos and a ruthless killer of outlaws, was doomed when Madero revolutionaries drove Diaz from the presidency.

The Mexican Cossack fought on for a time, but was finally forced to the Arizona line with the tattered remnants of his loyal Rurales. Here he made one final gesture. With his back to the border he held the town of Nogales, Sonora, against repeated onslaughts of the revolutionary rabble.

"Vivo Diaz!" he shouted profanely at the poor marksmanship of his attackers.

But Kosterlitzky was finally forced to admit defeat. He notified the commanding officer of American forces that he would cross the line and surrender at sundown. Then he whipped out his sword and ordered his gallant little band to make one final charge. With Kosterlitzky leading the Rurales thundered through the streets of Nogales, howling their battle cry against mobs which had gathered to jeer their humiliating departure.

When the charge ended the streets were strewn with dead and wounded. Kosterlitzky was through. No longer would grafting *jefe politicos* tremble at the approach of his coach-and-four. Never again would the big colonel ride through Sonora at the head of his hell-for-leather horsemen. But the mob which had gathered to jeer, paid him a tribute of shocked silence as Kosterlitzky led what remained of his Rurales to Arizona soil and surrendered his bloody sword.

After a short internment Kosterlitzky was reinstated as an American citizen and became chief of the U. S. Secret Service at Los Angeles. Thus the Mexican Cossack, who had been true to the law as he saw it, outlived most of the lawless rabble which rode against him.

Brant made a headlong dive for Lon Barton's long legs

The Faith of June Stover Sustains Lon Barton

a complete novelet

.45 Calibre Law

By CHUCK MARTIN

CHAPTER I

Damning Evidence

SHERIFF JOE FOSTER crouched low in the buck-brush which fringed the Box B yard. Dull gray daylight was beginning to show above the high peaks which hemmed Mono Valley in on all sides. The silent watcher was like a great lean wolf-hound as he waited for his prey.

A creaking hinge told Foster that a door was being opened, and his gray eyes narrowed as he watched the stout log house which Lon Barton called home. A blurring shadow moved swiftly and ran to the barn at the east side of the clearing.

Foster slapped for his .45 Colt, but the skulker had disappeared inside the barn. The sheriff growled in disappointment.

If there was damning evidence, it would not be in Lon Barton's log barn.

Foster moved like a hunting wolf as he made his stealthy approach toward the barn. The pre-dawn light was getting stronger, and a man would be sky-lined against the horizon to any one who was

When Dishonor and Injustice Stalk His Path!

watching from the dark interior of the stable.

Joe Foster stared at the open door, turned his head slightly, and stooped to pick up a twig. Then he moved without sound to the side of the barn, where a little window swung open, and listened.

In Mono Valley, a man learned to read all the signs of nature, and every sound had a significant meaning.

Joe Foster leaned far out and cracked the twig between the strong brown fingers of his left hand. Then he straightened up and eased his head and right hand through the little window. Foster smiled coldly when he saw a crouching man facing the barn door with a heavy six-shooter covering the wide opening.

"Drop that gun, Lon," Foster ordered sternly. "You're covered!"

The man inside the barn did not show panic. His fingers opened slowly to spill his six-shooter to the straw, and his hands went shoulder-high as he walked out through the barn door.

"I can explain this, Joe," the prisoner told Foster.

"You're under arrest for robbing the Blodgett stage!" Foster said slowly.

Lon Barton sighed. "I could explain," he said bitterly, "but you wouldn't believe me!"

JOE FOSTER circled his prisoner warily and came up behind Barton. Foster's left hand reached out and clicked a cuff around Barton's right wrist. His pistol touched Barton's back as he fastened the other cuff to Barton's left wrist. After which Foster holstered his six-shooter and turned Barton to face him.

"Joe Stanton was driving the stage, and he was hurt bad," Foster told Barton. "He recognized that stallion you were riding, and the robber's description fitted you!"

Lon Barton stared at his captor. There were five years difference in the ages of the two men. Lon Barton was the younger, and he was twenty-four. Both were mountain men who had been raised in the same tough school.

"You followed my sign," Barton said slowly.

"That's right," Foster agreed without emotion. "I found the stallion where you left him near Persimmon Creek. You lamed him bad, but you did strip off his riding gear."

"That stud stepped in a dog hole," Barton said. "I thought I'd have to shoot him at first, but the leg wasn't broke, so I gave him a chance."

"There was five thousand in that dispatch case," Foster said quietly. "I only found two hundred of the loot in your saddlebags. Where's the rest of that money?"

"Money?" Barton repeated. "I didn't see any money!"

Joe Foster was tall and blond, and his face was rugged from outdoor living. His eyes were bluish-gray. He looked at his prisoner searchingly for a long moment.

"You're a hard man, but a square one," Barton answered quietly. "I was riding home from the logging camp at Big Timber on my bay gelding, and I found that stallion just before sundown!"

"The stage was robbed at four o'clock," Foster said. "Between Blodgett and Big Timber."

Foster stooped suddenly and picked up Barton's fallen gun. He examined the loads, carried the weapon to his nose, and sniffed lightly.

"This gun has been fired recent," Foster said. He leaned forward. "How did you know the stage was held up?"

"Jim Brant—" Barton blurted out, then stopped.

"What about Jim Brant?" Foster pressed eagerly to follow up his advantage of surprise.

"Nothing," Barton answered grimly.

"Was Jim Brant here last night?" Foster demanded roughly.

"Ask him." Barton muttered. "I'm not talking."

"You better talk, Lon," Foster advised quietly. "I'm all the law there is in Mono Valley outside the Peoples Court, and you mentioned something about me being square!"

"This gives you the inside track," Barton said bitterly. "June Stover won't want any truck with me after today!"

"Are you forgetting Jim Brant?" the sheriff asked quietly, but his expression betrayed his anger. "Brant could buy and sell you and me, and throw us away!"

Lon Barton stared back at the big lawman with his jaw slanting pugnaciously. Then he turned with a shrug as the sun

burst up over the spiraled peaks of the Three Sisters Mountains.

"Let's get to town," Barton suggested. He approached the horse and picked up his bridle-reins with his manacled hands. "Will you take these off if I give my word not to try an escape?" he asked hopefully.

Joe Foster shook his head vigorously. "My orders are to cuff felons," he said gruffly. "Horse-stealing and robbery are both felonies, to say nothing about—murder!"

"This is the chance you have waited for ever since that fight we had the night of the big dance two years ago!" Barton rasped.

"I took off my star, and it was a fair fight," Foster answered, his face hard with a controlled anger. "Neither one of us won that fight."

"Like you said," Barton agreed, and his deep voice held the suggestion of a sneer. "So we decided to be friends, and you call this friendship!"

"That will be enough from you!" Foster burst out harshly.

HE MOTIONED Barton to climb his horse. He even boosted the manacled man to the saddle, took the reins, and led the horse across the Box B yard and into a brushy thicket where he had tied up his own stout roan.

Lon Barton remained silent until the sheriff climbed his saddle and started across the timbered grazing land. Barton cleared his throat suggestively and waited until Foster glanced at him sharply.

"Forty-five calibre law," Barton said bitterly. "All the evidence is against me, with you as a witness to prove my guilt. I'll face three men with six-shooters in their fists. Every one a dead shot." Barton shuddered at the thought. "Two of the guns will shoot slugs. The third will carry a blank so's not to make any of those fellers feel like a cold killer. Yeah, Joe; you're a square shooter!"

Joe Foster rode closer and towered above his slumping prisoner. Both were taller than six feet, and there was little difference between them in weight. A hundred and eighty pounds perhaps—saddle-lean and hickory-hard.

"I'd like to face you with a gun in my hand!" the lawman burst out savagely. "I'd like it to be like we said that night of the fight!"

Lon Barton straightened with a cold smile. There was no fear in his brown eyes as he locked glances with Foster.

"That goes for me, too," he said. "And may the best man win!"

"But I can't do it!" Foster snapped. "I rod the law. I can't fight any duels with a prisoner. You'll get a fair trial."

The eager light faded from Barton's brown eyes. Just before they reached the edge of Cragtown, he made a simple request.

"Take me in the back way, Joe. Every one in town is out there on the Main Street!"

CHAPTER II

Held Without Bail

JUNE STOVER slid down from the top rail of the corral behind the Cragtown jail. She saw the two tall men on horses coming down the alley, and June Stover winked rapidly to shed the quick tears which sprang to her dark blue eyes.

June Stover was a mixture of wild beauty and rugged strength. She wore the serviceable garb of a working cowboy. Her blond hair was a huge mass of gold under the black Stetson which was tilted to the back of her head and held by a throatlatch.

Joe Foster rode up with his prisoner and swung down from the saddle. He raised his wide-brimmed hat to the girl, touched Barton on the arm, and the Box B cowboy dismounted without a word. Then Barton looked up and saw June Stover. His lips twitched a time or two as he tried to find words to ease his humiliation.

"I know you didn't do it, Lon," June said.

Lon Barton bit his lower lip. Joe Foster urged him toward the back door of the jail. Barton spoke over his shoulder.

"Thanks, June," he said quietly. "I'm innocent on all counts."

Foster booked his prisoner as a matter of routine, straightened up from his desk,

and eyed his prisoner throughtfully. Then he came to Barton and methodically emptied the cowboy's pockets. Barton showed no resentment as Foster explained that he was only doing the duty required by his office.

Foster picked up a folded paper and smoothed it between his big hands. He read the penciled writing slowly, glanced up to stare at Barton and asked a low question.

"Who wrote this note?"

Barton shrugged his square shoulders. "It was in my house when I rode in last night," he answered tonelessly. "That's the first I knew about that hold-up."

"You've no idea who left it there?"

"I've got an idea," Barton replied gruffly. "He didn't sign his name, but I saw a man riding away from my Box B as I came through the timber."

"*Hmm,*" Foster grunted. "I'll keep it as part of the evidence. I've fixed it with Judge Fowler to arraign you in private. We can go in the back way."

June Stover had gone when the two men came out the back door of the jail and entered a room just across the alley, also by the back door. A tall spare man glanced up from a low desk at which he was seated. His face was almost covered by a luxuriant gray beard.

"Good morning, Sheriff," he greeted Foster. "Good morning, Lon Barton."

"Howdy, Judge Fowler," Barton answered respectfully. "Can I put my ranch up as security for my bond?"

Judge Fowler was sixty-five, but he didn't need glasses. His steely blue eyes studied the prisoner's face for a long moment, and then he turned to Foster.

"Is the prisoner eligible for bond?" he asked in a deep vibrant voice. "What are the charges?" He rapidly read the short complaint the sheriff had written out. "Ah! The charges are robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, with intent to commit murder, and horse-stealing. Since he is accused of murder, I cannot admit him to bail. I've known Lon Barton all his life. If circumstances were different I would accept his personal bond. What evidence have you, Sheriff?"

Joe Foster twisted uneasily. Then he stated his case, telling of the stallion he had found in the brush pocket, the two hundred dollars in the saddlebags, and lastly he handed the note to Judge Fowler. The Judge took the paper and read aloud just above his breath.

The law is after you for stealing the Stover stallion, and for robbing the Blodgett stage. You better cover up, or get out of town!

Judge Fowler pursed his thin lips, tugged on his beard, and then he leaned forward to study the writing closely. His face was stern as he leaned back and spoke to Joe Foster.

"Remove the right handcuff, sheriff. I want Barton to copy this note for me!'

FOSTER produced his keys and removed the right cuff. He pulled out a chair and beckoned with his head for Barton to be seated, and Judge Fowler handed the bewildered cowboy a pencil and a slip of paper.

"Write down what I say," the judge ordered sternly, and he repeated the warning note, word for word.

Lon Barton bit the pencil and started to write in a bold legible hand. When finished, he laid the pencil aside and pushed the paper toward the judge. Fowler picked up the paper and compared it with the original note, and an angry scowl flashed across his bearded face.

"I remand the prisoner to your custody without bail!" Judge Fowler barked. "The same man wrote both these notes!"

Lon Barton leaped to his feet, and his dark eyes were flashing with rage. His attitude was so threatening that Judge Fowler rebuked him sternly:

"I advise you not to add to your offences, Barton. You will receive a fair trial in the Peoples Court, based solely on the evidence produced!"

Lon Barton stared at Fowler in despair. He turned blindly toward the back door which Foster had opened, and a moment later Barton was locked in one of the two cells. Joe Foster locked the door and spoke in a low whisper.

"Tell me the truth, Lon. That man you saw riding away from your Box B. Was it—Jim Brant?"

"Who ever it was, he might have just been out riding," Barton growled thickly. "I'd like to see old Charley Stover."

"And I'd like to see you where you belong," a hoarse voice growled from the sheriff's office out in front.

Joe Foster wheeled as a big wide-shoul-

dered man turned sidewise to come through the door of the cell-block. Old Charley Stover was a mountain cattleman from battered Stetson to run-down cowboy boots. His thick blond hair was almost white, but there was no sign of age in Charley Stover's movements. He had just turned fifty, and could out-ride or outwork any man in his C Bar S crew.

Lon Barton stood at the door with his hands gripping the steel bars. He had done contract work for Stover, breaking the old cattleman's horses at ten dollars a head. Stover was rough and ready, and full of fight, but he had always shown a liking for the man he now faced behind the bars.

"I didn't take that black stallion, old Charley," Barton said earnestly.

"You took him," Stover accused fiercely. "You broke that Morgan stud, and he was hard to handle. None of the boys will top that devil off, and you know it!"

"Wait a minute, old Charley," Joe Foster interrupted in a low drawl. "There was one other man, and I saw him ride the stallion. Or are you forgetting that timber cruiser, Jim Brant?"

Stover whirled to face the sheriff with a change on his weathered face. "By dogies, you've got something there, Joe!" he agreed. Then he shrugged irritably. "Brant was in town here when that Sevens cowboy brought in the news," he said slowly. "And he was riding that blood bay of his."

Lon Barton remained silent as he watched the two men outside his cell. Charley Stover tugged at his lower lip like a man will do who is riding the back trail of memory. He glanced at Barton and shot a swift question.

"Just where were you yesterday afternoon?"

"Up Persimmon Creek," Barton answered without hesitation. "I was making a tally of my shipping beef, and hoping maybe to catch a sight of a big cat that killed some of my weaner calves."

AT THIS Foster and Stover glanced at each other, and both nodded. Lon Barton interpreted the pantomine as proof of his guilt. Persimmon Creek was only three miles from the scene of the robbery, and the sheriff spoke slowly.

"I followed the sign from the hold-up location. It led right up to Persimmon Creek. That black stallion of yours wasn't far from the creek, Charley."

"If you needed some ready cash, why didn't you come to me?" Stover demanded roughly of Barton.

"I didn't need money!" Barton blazed back savagely. "I've got better than a hundred head of steers about ready for market!"

"Heard you was fixing to build you a new house after roundup," Stover said slowly.

Lon Barton turned his back to hide the flush of embarrassment which stained his tanned face. "I won't be needing a new house now," he said bitterly. "Not after I stand trial in Peoples Court!"

"New house?" Joe Foster repeated in a whisper and his eyes widened. Then his face changed as the back door opened to admit June Stover who walked up to her father and faced him with reproach in her dark blue eyes.

"You two should feel real proud of yourselves," she said scornfully. "Baiting a man who can't fight back, instead of riding out yonder to read *all* the sign!"

"What sign?" Charley Stover roared, but his anger was poorly simulated as he refused to meet his daughter's scornful gaze.

"Killer sign and rustler sign," June told him quietly. "Starting at the beginning, and following it through to the end!"

"Getting right out there," Joe Foster said hurriedly, and he left the jail by the back door.

"I'll side the sheriff," Charley Stover mumbled, and almost ran from the cell block.

Lon Barton turned then and reached through the bars to take one of the girl's brown hands. He gripped firmly until she raised her head and looked at him searchingly.

"You were listening," he accused gently. "You heard what old Charley said about me building a new house. And like he said, I won't be needing it now. I love you, June. Was going to ask you to marry a cowboy who is just getting himself a mighty nice start!"

June Stover stared with her red lips parted. Then she came close to the bars and kissed the prisoner full on the lips.

"I've got to go now, Lon," she said soft-

ly, but her voice was a low hum of happiness. "I want you to build that new house!"

She stepped back before Lon Barton had recovered from his surprise. June Stover ran from the jail, mounted her horse, and Barton could hear the drumming hoofs as she raced up the alley toward the west.

CHAPTER III

Reading Sign

HUMMING a song of the cow-trails, June Stover put her horse to a steep short-cut leading to Little Sister Mountain. She stopped singing when a man rode out of the timber on a blood-bay, but she continued up the trail when she realized that he had already seen her.

"Good morning, Jim Brant," she called cheerily, and Brant lifted his small hat and rode to meet her.

June's eyes narrowed a bit as she watched the timber cruiser. Brant was tall and compactly built, and he always had a ready smile. His dark curly hair was well groomed, and he handled his horse expertly.

"You were coming to see me?" he asked, and his deep voice was almost like a caress.

"Jim, where were you yesterday afternoon?" June asked.

"I was in town at five o'clock," Brant answered promptly. "Before that I was cruising timber back there on Middle Sister Mountain. Why do you ask?"

"Did you see Lon Barton?" June followed up her direct questioning.

Brant shrugged and looked away. "I saw several riders," he evaded.

"Did you ride to the Box B last night?'

Brant rode closer and stared at June's flannel shirt. "I don't see any law-star," he chided laughingly. "For a minute I thought perhaps you were a deputy sheriff."

"Mono Valley has never had a deputy sheriff," June answered gravely. "We have only one officer, and he is elected by the people. It is his business to present the evidence against any prisoner he might arrest, and we never call on the outside law."

"I've been here two years," Brant answered quietly. "I know all about the self-sufficient law of Mono Valley. You were saying?"

"Nothing," June murmured. "Any man in Mono would give Lon Barton a first-class character reference."

"It looks bad for Lon," Brant said in a voice of regret. "He's worked hard to build up his Box B, and I offered him five thousand dollars for that stand of timber on his upper range."

"Lon said the timber was worth ten thousand," June answered, and her voice was a little on the edgy side. "He only wants that timber thinned out, and not entirely cut over."

"I saw Joe Foster out riding last night," Brant changed the subject. "He was heading over toward the Box B. He thinks a lot of you, June."

"Did he tell you that?" June demanded sharply.

Brant shrugged his wide shoulders. He was wearing riding breeches with the legs tucked down in laced boots, and like every other man in Mono Valley, he wore a .45 Colt six-shooter at his right hip.

"Joe can speak for himself," Brant answered with a smile. "I'm doing right well here, June," he continued, and now his handsome face was serious. "I'm not ashamed to tell you honestly that I love you. Can I—hope?"

June Stover gasped and then recovered her composure. "I cannot say I reciprocate, Jim," she said calmly.

"But you don't dislike me," Brant said confidently. "We've danced and rode together, and I think I like you most because you are so self-reliant."

"Lon Barton is an old friend," June said simply. "Now his life is in danger, and I am sure he is innocent."

"I hope so," Brant replied shortly, but his tone was resentful. "Of course, the evidence is overwhelming."

"The evidence is all circumstantial," June retorted angrily.

"That's law business, and none of mine," Brant said with a smile.

"Speaking of the law, here comes Joe

Foster," June answered and Brant followed the direction of her eyes.

FOSTER saw the pair and lifted his horse to a trot. He touched the brim of his Stetson as he spoke to June, and his face hardened a trifle as he turned to Jim Brant.

"When you were cruising up around Middle Mountain yesterday, did you hear a pistol shot, Brant?" Foster asked bluntly.

Brant shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "I didn't hear any shot," he denied. "Why do you ask?"

"I might as well tell you," Foster answered grudgingly. "Lon Barton said he shot a rattler near the place where he claims he found the Stover stallion."

Brant shrugged again. "Sound travels quite a ways back in these mountains," he said lightly. "Of course the loggers are working back there on Big Sister Mountain, but all I heard was the ring of their axes."

"I've never known Lon to lie," June said softly, but her voice told of her worry.

"He didn't lie about the snake," Foster spoke up quickly. "I rode down there looking for sign, and I found some. There was a little spot of dried blood, with here and there a drop if you looked close. I followed those drops for perhaps fifty yards, and I found a big snake with thirteen rattles. The head was almost shot away, and some one had picked up the snake with a broken branch. Who ever did it covered up the dead snake with leaves, but you know how snakes are. They don't die until sundown, and this one had wriggled partly out from under the leaves."

"One of the choppers might have hit that snake with his ax," Brant said slowly.

"No," Foster contradicted. "An ax would have severed that snake's head, and this was done by a forty-five slug. I skinned a big rattler last fall, and the body was still wriggling three hours later."

"I never made a study of snakes," Brant said with a shrug.

"This one must have rattled to warn Lon," Foster said thoughtfully. "A diamond-back gives a warning always. It's the side-winders a man has to watch out for."

"Well, I've got to be riding," Brant said abruptly. "Don't hesitate to call on me if there is anything I can do to help Lon."

Joe Foster watched the timber cruiser ride away. Then he turned to June and smiled slowly.

"I'm a sneak, June," he confessed quietly. "I was down the trail while you were talking to Brant."

"Yes," June said with a friendly smile. "I saw the top of your hat, but you didn't make a sound going through the timber."

"I'm glad you don't care much for Jim Brant," Foster continued slowly. "What does reciprocate mean?"

June Stover blushed and stared at her saddle-horn. "It means when someone feels a certain way about you, you reciprocate when you have similar emotions," she explained quietly, and refused to meet the sheriff's eyes.

"I believe I understand," Foster murmured. "Like when I hit Lon Barton in the jaw, he reciprocated when he landed one on my whiskers," he said, with a chuckle.

"That's right, but you and Lon have been good friends since that fight," June answered heartily.

"Lon Barton is a square-shooter from here to who pried the chunk," Foster stated positively. "All the evidence was against him until I found that dead snake. I'm going to keep on looking for sign!"

JUNE reached out and gripped the sheriff's big right hand. "I knew you would, Joe," she said eagerly. "And you can read sign where another man wouldn't see any!"

"I'll do my duty," Foster said stiffly, and then his rugged face softened again as he held the girl's hand. 'Do I have any chance?" he asked slowly.

"I'm sure you will find evidence," June answered, and avoided Foster's questioning gaze.

"I'm talking about you and me." The sheriff refused to be misunderstood. "I'd build a new house—if I had any use for one!"

June looked distressed, and Foster released her hand. "It's going to be tough for me," he said slowly. "Testifying against Lon Barton."

June glanced up quickly, and studied the sheriff's rugged face. She tried to detect some softening in his attitude, but Joe

Foster was once more the law in Mono Valley.

"You will testify according to the evidence you find, Joe," June said firmly. "That's the way Lon and I would both want it."

"That's the way it will be," Foster said sternly, and touching the brim of his hat with his left hand, he rode rapidly down the steep trail.

June Stover watched his broad back until Foster was out of sight. Then she gigged her horse with a blunted spur and continued up the trail. A few minutes later she rode out on a little mesa where Jim Brant had built a modern cabin.

"It means so much," June whispered nervously, and she dismounted to tie her horse to a tall pine.

A moment later she entered the neat cabin through the unlocked kitchen door. No one locked their doors in Mono Valley, and a neighbor was free to borrow any bit of gear he might need.

June stood in the kitchen and looked about. She told herself that Brant was as neat about his cabin as he was in his personal appearance.

She moved past a small bedroom, admired a Hudson Bay blanket, and continued to the big front living room. A flat-topped desk stood in one corner near an open fireplace, and June walked to the desk and studied the papers. Then she gasped softly and reached for a note book which was lying open on the desk.

CHAPTER IV

The People's Court

CURIOUSLY Judge Fowler glanced at the crowded courtroom, turning his head a trifle to study the faces of the seven men who made up the Council. Then he rapped for order with the butt of his .45 six-shooter. He did not look directly at Lon Barton who was in the prisoner's box under guard of Joe Foster.

Briefly, the stern-faced judge read the indictments against the defendant. Lon Barton was charged with stealing Charley Stover's stallion, with robbing the Blodgett mail. The judge looked directly at the prisoner.

"And with murder!" he continued harshly. "Joe Stanton was the driver of the stage, and he is dead!"

Lon Barton sat up straight and stared at Judge Fowler with a stricken expression in his wide brown eyes. His mouth was open a trifle, but he trapped his lips together as a murmur of anger ran through the courtroom.

There were no character witnesses for the defense. The case would be decided upon the evidence gathered by Sheriff Joe Foster. Foster took the stand and was sworn to tell the truth. After which the lawman faced the Council and told of his findings.

Three of the men on the council were lumbermen, three were cattlemen, and the seventh man was Abel Furness who owned the General Store. Furness was the balance wheel between lumber and cattle; an upright man of seventy-odd years. A full white beard covered the lower part of his ruddy face. Furness had at one time studied for the law.

Joe Foster told of the stage hold-up which had netted the bandit five thousand dollars. He read a deposition taken from the dying driver who had said that the bandit looked very much like Lon Barton. The driver had positively identified Charley Stover's black stallion, and Foster told how he had tracked the stallion down and had found him hidden near Persimmon Creek.

The crowd of townspeople listened intently, and with absolute silence. Occasionally Abel Furness would ask a question in a deep rich voice which compelled both attention and respect.

Joe Foster told how he had waited near the Box B house for day-break, and of Barton's capture as the prisoner was getting ready to ride out. He also told about the note, and Judge Fowler passed the two notes to the Council for their study.

Lon Barton watched Abel Furness with a peculiar intensity. The old storekeeper was studying the original note, and comparing it with the one Judge Fowler had asked Barton to copy.

A spot of color leaped to the high cheekbones of Abel Furness's face, but he

passed the notes to his colleagues for their examination. Joe Foster continued to give his evidence, and a little murmur rippled through the crowd as the sheriff told of the one shot fired from Barton's six-shooter.

"He said he shot a snake near the place where he claims he found the lame stallion," Foster told the Council. "When I examined the ground, there was no dead snake in sight!"

Barton saw the men of the council slowly nod their heads. They nodded again when Foster told about finding the two hundred dollars in the saddle-bags which had been clumsily hidden under a deadfall. But even Barton was unprepared for the change of pace when Joe Foster cleared his throat and leaned forward to address the council in a loud ringing voice.

"The fate of the prisoner depends largely upon my testimony," Foster began, and then he paused.

"You will stick to the evidence, sheriff," Judge Fowler warned sternly.

"I went down yesterday to search for evidence," Foster continued clearly. "I found some sign where a little splotch of blood had dried. I followed this trace for fifty yards—and I found a dead diamond-back with thirteen rattles. Some one had carried that dead snake away, and had hidden it under a bank of leaves!"

LON BARTON half arose to his feet as the crowd grunted with surprise. Here was the first evidence in his favor, and every man in the council turned to stare at the prisoner. Judge Fowler glared at Joe Foster as he rapped with the butt of his six-shooter for silence.

"How was the snake killed?" Fowler asked.

"The head had almost been shot away," Foster answered quietly.

"Some one should have heard the shot," Judge Fowler said thoughtfully. "Did you make inquiry?"

"I did, Your Honor," Foster answered reluctantly. "Jim Brant was cruising timber near Middle Sister Mountain, but he said he heard no shot."

Abel Furness leaned forward at the mention of Brant's name. He raised a hand and jerked his head at old Charley Stover who was seated in the front row.

"Did Lon Barton break that stallion of yours for saddle?" the old storekeeper asked, and a ripple of amusement ran through the crowd. Every man in Mono Valley knew the answer, but Furness held up his hand for silence.

"Barton is the best horse-breaker in the valley," Stover answered tersely. "He broke that stallion for me!"

"Jim Brant," Furness continued in his deep rich voice. "Did he ever ride that black stallion?"

"Well, yes he did," Stover admitted. "Which is more than I can say for any of my own crew of cowhands."

"Then Brant could have ridden the stallion." Furness had made his point, and leaned back for the reaction he knew would follow.

"Jim Brant was here in Cragtown when that Sevens cowboy rode in with the news about the hold-up!" Stover barked.

Judge Fowler was staring at Sheriff Foster. "Have you anything to add about Jim Brant?" he asked suggestively.

Joe Foster twitched one big shoulder as he hesitated. "Lon Barton said he saw Jim Brant riding away from his Box B spread the night of the killing," Foster stated, but Barton shook his head.

Judge Fowler saw the gesture and asked the prisoner a question.

"You saw Jim Brant the night the sheriff mentioned?"

"I couldn't be sure, Your Honor," Barton answered honestly. "It looked like Brant, but the man I saw was wearing a Stetson."

"Jim Brant wears a dinky hat," Foster interrupted.

"You have heard the evidence, gentlemen," Judge Fowler addressed the council. "You will weigh this evidence carefully. If found guilty, the prisoner will face a firing squad composed of three picked marksmen. Two of them will fire loaded cartridges; the third man will shoot a blank. Is it your wish to retire so that you may arrive at a decision?"

"Just a moment, Your Honor," Abel Furness spoke up quickly. "All the evidence has not been produced!"

The other members of the council had started to arise, but they sank back in their chairs as Furness spoke. The old storekeeper was noted for his fair and careful judgments, and when he spoke, men listened with respect.

"I believe Lon Barton spoke the truth when he said that he found the original note in his house," Furness continued calmly.

Judge Fowler frowned and rapped for order. He asked the old storekeeper to explain his statement, and Abel Furness smiled as he glanced over the crowd.

"I reckon I see more hand-writing than most here in Cragtown," he said with a little chuckle. "I do a credit business with those I know, and I know most of the folks in Mono Valley. They send in their written orders, and they sign for their goods."

"Your point is well taken, Abel," Judge Fowler admitted dryly. "You have fed and clothed most of us at one time or another when times were bad. You will continue?"

"A man gets to be a judge of hand-writing after fifty-odd years," Furness said slowly. "One man forgets to cross his *t's*, and another don't dot his *i's*. Or perhaps he will make a little circle instead of a dot, and there are different ways of making capital letters."

Lon Barton leaned forward, watching the old storekeeper intently. Joe Foster balanced easily with his boots spread wide, and Judge Fowler frowned with impatience.

"The same man did not write those two notes!" Furness said clearly. "Lon Barton dotted his *i's*, while the writer of the original note used tiny circles over those letters!"

A HUM ran through the courtroom as the notes were passed from hand to hand among the council. Each man nodded solemnly, and with a certain unmistakable relief. Judge Fowler was the last to examine the notes, and he also nodded reluctantly.

"You've made your point, Abel," he conceded. "Can you tell us who wrote the original note?"

Abel Furness slowly shook his big head. "That I can't," he admitted sadly. "Whoever wrote that note has never asked me for credit. It will be a man who is well supplied with ready money."

Judge Fowler glanced around the room as though he were searching for some one. He frowned impatiently, and then he turned to old Charley Stover.

"Your daughter June," he said bluntly. "She didn't ride in with you?"

Charley Stover glanced around with a look of alarmed wonder on his weathered face.

"Come to think of it, I didn't see June last night or this morning," he said slowly. "I rode in early, figuring she would come along later!"

Every man in the court-room straightened up to listen as pounding hoofs hammered up the dusty street from the west. They were watching the door when it burst open, and June Stover ran in and came to a stop before the bar of justice.

"I'm glad I got here in time!" she panted. "I have found new evidence!"

"Would it be the man who left that note in Barton's house?" Abel Furness asked quietly, but his face was tense with strain.

"How did you know?" June exclaimed, and she took a notebook from her hip pocket. "Does any one recognize this book?" she asked.

Lon Barton and the sheriff were both staring at the book, but it was one of the three lumbermen on the Council who answered the excited girl.

"That book belongs to Jim Brant!" he stated positively. "The columns are ruled for his figures, and he uses paper like that when cruising timber!"

"I found this book on Brant's desk in his cabin," June explained. "There is no writing legible on the top page, but if you look close, you can see the impression made by the pencil which wrote a note on the page which has been torn out!"

Abel Furness took the book and held it to the light. Then he read slowly as he deciphered the deep impressions made by a pencil.

The law is after you for stealing the Stover stallion and for robbing the Blodgett stage. You better cover up, or get out of town!

Then Abel Furness took the original note and fitted it to the torn edges in the note-book. Every man on the council leaned forward to watch, and every man nodded his head vigorously. Furness called attention to the little circles over the four *i's* in the note.

"Gentlemen," he asked gravely: "What is your verdict?"

The Council spoke as one man as they rendered a unanimous decision.

"Not Guilty!"

CHAPTER V

Unfinished Business

LON BARTON rode out of town with his horse in a dead run. He was once more a free man, and the sun had never seemed so bright. The townspeople had congratulated him, assuring him that they had been positive of his innocence, but Barton had been unable to thank June Stover for the evidence which had saved his life.

Another man had left town at a gallop while Barton had been receiving congratulations. Lon Barton knew that the law was riding on a man-hunt, and the cowboy's jaw tightened grimly. The law would have to hunt for evidence, and would go directly to Jim Brant's cabin near Little Sister Mountain.

Judge Fowler had returned Barton's cartridge belt and six-shooter to the acquitted prisoner. The judge had also warned Barton to let the law take its course, and Barton had agreed reluctantly. Now he needed a shave and a change of clothing, and time in which to think.

It was almost noon when Barton rode into his Box B yard. He rode directly to his big barn, slid down at the tie-rail, and started to strip the riding gear from his sweating horse. Barton's hands stopped loosening the latigo strap when a horse whickered softly from the brush screen behind the barn. The same place where Sheriff Joe Foster had hidden after an all-night vigil.

Lon Barton kept his head down and unloosened his cinch. Instead of carrying his saddle to the barn, he laid it across the tie-rail so the skirts would catch the air. With his head down, he stared at the ground just inside the barn. A long shadow lanced out almost to the sill.

Lon Barton showed no excitement as he began to hum carelessly. Some one was waiting for him to enter the barn, and that someone was wearing a wide-brimmed Stetson, and held a pistol.

Barton continued to hum as he walked to the side of the barn and turned a tap to fill the horse-trough with water. The old windmill above the tank began to turn with a soft metallic sound, and Lon Barton stopped humming.

He crouched low as he crept up to the same little window which Joe Foster had used to get the drop on him. Barton drew his heavy pistol, straightened slowly, and glanced inside the barn.

A tall man was hiding just inside the barn's open door, and the pistol in his hand was held like a club. The man wore tailored riding breeches, laced boots.

All the pent-up anger flooded through Lon Barton's veins as he recognized one of his own hats on Jim Brant's curly brown head. He leaned through the window and struck with all his strength at the tall crown of that Stetson. Then Barton moved swiftly and raced around the corner and into the barn just as Jim Brant fell face-forward.

Barton ran in and kicked away the gun which had fallen from the timber cruiser's right hand. A horse roared into the yard at top speed, and June Stover stepped down a-running as her horse slid to a stop.

"Lon!" she cried, and then she saw him inside the barn.

Lon Barton turned slowly, and all the anger was gone from his bronzed face. He didn't say anything, just opened his arms as he faced June Stover.

June smiled and stepped inside those strong arms.

"I knew you were innocent, Lon," she said quietly, but Barton's hungry lips stopped further conversation.

June Stover closed her eyes as contentment brought her happiness. Then she was suddenly hurled to the side as Barton lunged and kicked viciously, and he was facing Jim Brant in a crouch when June recovered her balance.

Brant was on hands and knees with his right hand extended toward his fallen six-shooter. Now he snarled at Lon Barton like a timber wolf that has been cornered in a blind canyon. A deep voice spoke sternley behind Lon Barton.

"I'll take the prisoner, Lon," said Sheriff Joe Foster.

Jim Brant stared at Foster, snatched up the pistol, and made a headlong dive for Lon Barton's long legs. Barton leaped lightly aside, dropped his six-shooter, and threw himself on top of the rolling pris-

oner. His right fist plunged forward and down to crack against Brant's jaw like the handle of a bull-whip on a pile of soggy hides, and Jim Brant flattened out.

Joe Foster nudged Barton aside with one big shoulder and leaned over the unconscious man. The handcuffs clicked metallically, and Foster straightened up with a tired sigh. He faced Barton and offered his right hand with a smile.

"I reckon you'll build that new house now, Lon," he said slowly. "I'm wishing you and June all the happiness I know you will have!"

"Thanks, Joe," Barton said gratefully, but he didn't seem comfortable. The two big men gripped hard.

June Stover offered her hand, and when Foster gripped her fingers the girl raised up on her toes and kissed his tanned cheek.

"They don't make them any better than you, Joe," she said earnestly. "There was a time when I thought perhaps you had written that note, and I'm saying I'm sorry. You couldn't be any other way than fine and big!"

"I'll settle for the big part," Foster said with a grin, and once more he was at ease.

"You went out of your way to find that snake I shot," Barton added gratefully.

"Brant hid that snake," Foster explained. "Notice the flat heels on his laced boots. I found his sign near that dead-fall where the snake was hidden, but that wasn't enough evidence."

June Stover kicked idly at a gunny-sack, and stooped down to examine it when the toe of her boot made a tinny sound. She up-ended the sack, and a tin dispatch case dropped to the floor of the barn. Joe Foster turned with his six-shooter drawn when Jim Brant sat up with a snarl of rage. "Quiet!" the sheriff ordered. "Or I'll hammer you between the horns with my six-shooter!"

Jim Brant surged to his feet with his hands manacled behind his back. He made a rush at Foster, but Barton stepped forward and spun the killer around with a thrust of his shoulder.

"Don't shoot, Joe!" Barton barked. "He's trying to beat what he knows he will get from the Peoples Court!"

Joe Foster holstered his gun and tripped the prisoner. June Stover had opened the dispatch case, and stared at several packages of paper money. The band had been broken on one package, and June made a quick count.

"There's two hundred dollars missing from this one," she said quietly. "The same two hundred you found in those saddle-bags Lon took from our stallion."

"And you hid that money here in my barn," Barton said slowly, as he stared at the snarling prisoner. "You imitated my writing when you wrote that note, and you said you hadn't been here the day of the hold-up!"

"You can't prove anything for sure!" Brant shouted.

"I was in your cabin," June spoke up quietly. "I found that note-book from which you had torn the page on which you had written the note. I feel sorry for you."

JIM BRANT wilted, and the fight left him. He began to sway when Joe Foster told him that Joe Stanton had died. Then the guilty man fell face-forward.

"Can I have the lend of your buckboard, Lon?" Foster asked. "I'm going to tie up his feet, and I don't want to trust him on a saddle."

"I'll harness up the team," Barton offered, and hurried to get the horses.

"There goes the squarest man I know," Foster told June. "He wouldn't identify Jim Brant as long as there was a doubt in his mind, and that doubt was only because Brant was wearing one of Lon's hats."

June shuddered and spoke softly. "I almost died when I thought of Lon facing the Peoples Court, and I wasn't sure I could get there in time. When I think of those three men with six-shooters—"

"Yeah," the sheriff murmured. "Two with loaded guns, and one shooting a blank." His rugged face became stern as he stirred Brant with the toe of his boot. "They saved them for the real killer," he added gruffly.

Lon Barton came back leading the harnessed team. He spanned them to his light buckboard, helped Foster carry the prisoner outside, and the sheriff tied Jim Brant securely.

"I'll be getting back to town," he said quietly, and touched his hat with the fingers of his left hand. "You two have got a lot of unfinished business. As for that killer on the buckboard, he'll get—forty-five calibre law!"

Make Way for a HERO

Flame tongued out of the gambler's gun

By DAVID X. MANNERS

Neal O'Keefe is little and timid, but when the chips are down—

NEAL O'KEEFE liked the smell of the women in the Ogallala Saloon. He stood with his back to the bar, his drink untouched behind him and watched the girl called Muriel pass by. Her dress was off-the-shoulders and cut low, and there was a paper flower in her hair. She smelled something like lilacs, and the perfume tantalized Neal. He lowered his lids in thought, savoring the feeling she stirred in him.

"Why don't you get her, Neal?" a man beside him said.

Neal turned, feeling his ears flush hot. It was Bill Jeeter, who dealt for the house.

"I was just lookin'," Neal said. "That's all."

Jeeter prodded him in the chest with outthrust fingers. "That's the trouble with gents like you. You look, and lolly-gag around, but haven't got the spine to do anything. Or maybe you think Muriel ain't good enough for you?"

Bill Jeeter had come from New York two years before, and he had lost little of his polish or smooth city ways. He was tall, with black hair, and the short boots he wore under his striped pants was his single concession to Western dress.

"I didn't say that," Neal said. "I didn't say anything at all."

"You as good as said it."

Jeeter was looking for an argument. In the couple of times Neal had sat in at games at the Ogallala he'd found Jeeter to be a proddy gent with a temper that boiled easily. Jeeter wore no visible weapon, but the hombre named Maddox whom he'd brought along from the East, always sat just behind him on a high stool, a scattergun across his knees. Nevertheless, Neal did know the gambler packed a small sleeve gun, and just now that thought made Neal more aware than ever that he wasn't toting iron himself.

Bill Jeeter was waiting for an answer to his challenge. He obviously delighted in picking on men smaller than himself for the pleasure of seeing them back down. And now, among others in his audience, he had the sheriff and the owner of the saloon.

"Well, is that it, Neal? Isn't Muriel good enough for you?"

"Okay, she is, if that's what you want me to say," Neal said angrily, but most of the anger was at himself for letting himself be bossed around.

"All right!" Jeeter exclaimed and turned away contemptuously, to the accompaniment of laughter and snickers from the men at the bar at the way he'd squelched Neal. "Fill up my glass, barkeep!"

Neal thrust away his own half emptied glass and strode to the door, feeling even smaller than his five feet five. Swearing silently that he'd never enter the Ogallala again, he strode out into the bright sunlight.

TOM SMITH, who owned the powerful T-S spread, pushed out of the Ogallala doors as Neal was untying his team from the rail. He hitched his pants up about his hipless middle and came over to the rail.

"Why did yuh take that dressin' down, Neal?" he asked. "Why didn't yuh rope, trip and tie that critter?"

Neal shook his head. "Because I don't like to be forced into doing things by temper," he said. "You don't slap a brand on with a red hot iron. Yuh wait till it grays down for best results. That's the way I figger to do things."

"Good enough," the cattleman agreed readily. "Just so's yuh remember an iron that's not hot enough ain't good either. No brand'll hair over clean if the iron doesn't have some sizzle."

"I savvy that," Neal said, and untying the lines from the brake, he climbed up on the wagon seat, and turned his mule team away from the rail.

Tom Smith, despite being the wealthiest rancher in Ogallala Basin was a generous and kindly man. He'd given Neal a job when the only thing Neal had known for months had been "working for Hunt and Russell"—hunting a place to stay and rustling grub. And instead of being opposed to Neal's pulling out and starting a spread of his own, he'd given a helping hand and friendly encouragement. He'd given Neal a horse when a cow had killed his by hooking it through the head, and the fancy chased belt with a Mexican silver buckle Neal wore around his middle was a bonus from Smith too.

Driving down the rutted street, Neal looked at the size of the men on the boardwalk. There wasn't one who didn't top him by a head or outweigh him by fifty pounds. The hot wind carried the breath of pine and the fragrance reminded him of the far different scent that had wafted from Muriel as she had passed him by. At least he wished he didn't have ears that stuck out like a calf's.

Just then Neal passed the hash-house, and he craned to look in through its front window. There was a reason. Whenever Neal day-dreamed about what he would do if he had the looks, or were as easy with words as Bill Jeeter, it was not anyone like Muriel he set his sights for—but the cute little blonde-haired Taffy, who waited on the counter at the hash-house. Whenever he could manage it, Neal ate there. Taffy was as fresh as paint, but

as wholesome as the great outdoors, and he at least hoped some day to screw up enough courage to ask her to go out riding with him.

Neal was so engrossed in his thoughts, two hours fled by before he knew it and his own little spread was in view. It was a section of high, rock-covered ridges and low timbered hills that everyone had thought—because of its inaccessibility—was good for nothing. But Neal O'Keefe had singlehandedly built a road by knocking off the tops of the slanting flat rock until a four mule team and wagon could negotiate it. And it had a fine bluestem pasture.

The trail dipped across a stream, and then there was Neal's cabin, its log walls chunked with mud. There was still a little spiral of smoke coming from the mud chimney, the last of his breakfast fire. Unhitching the mules, he hung the harness in the shack back of the house and then began unloading the sacked corn, for which he'd made the trip into town.

As he worked he flung a glance at his two riding horses, Fleet and Magic, in the holding corral. It was not the sort of corral that Tom Smith had, that could handle five hundred to seven hundred cattle at a crack. But some day Neal hoped to have one like it, split by a branding chute with a cutting gate at its end, so that cattle could be turned from one half the corral into the other half after branding.

Meanwhile he was content. All the material for what he had built here, with the exception of the corrugated sheet-iron roof on the shack, had come from within a quarter of a mile of where he stood. And it was a beautiful spot. Does dropped their fawns in the blackjack motts that dotted his pasture, and flocks of wild turkeys, led by proud toms, fed in the pecan trees along the streams. Squirrels were everywhere as thick as bees.

The sound of hoofbeats drew his eyes toward the trail just as Neal finished unloading. Two horsemen were splashing across the stream. As they climbed up the rocky slope toward him, he recognized one of the riders as Bill Jeeter, and the other as Maddox, his bodyguard.

Stopping a hundred yards off, the two riders dismounted. Then, casually, they began sauntering about, as if they well might be prospective purchasers, looking over something they were interested in buying, and as if they hadn't seen Neal at all.

Neal O'Keefe felt the anger rising slowly in him. Deliberately, he pounded the dust from his denim pants and moved toward the men. Still ignoring him, they turned toward the corral and Neal saw Maddox point at Fleet and then at Magic. Maddox was not as tall as Jeeter, but what he lacked in height he more than made up for in girth. He reminded Neal of a bear he had once seen that was as big as a two-year-old steer.

"Something you gents want?" Neal asked.

Jeeter turned with a smile. "Just admiring your horses, Neal," he said.

"Yeah," said Maddox. There was a red, a white, and a yellow poker chip threaded through the chin strap of his flat-crowned black hat. "Dem's de nicest pair o' nags I ever seen dat wasn't on a merry-go-round. 'Cept maybe a couple I seen in Prospect Park back East."

Whatever it was the two were up to. Neal knew he didn't like it. "You aim to make somethin' of it?" he asked bluntly.

"No," said Jeeter, and once again he turned away from Neal. With Maddox following, he headed for the door of the cabin.

"Just a minute," Neal said. The two men stopped. "I give yuh just thirty seconds to light a shuck off this place."

Neal's hunting rifle hung on a pair of antlers inside the cabin, and his only six-shooter was safely tucked away in a chest at the foot of his bunk. Jeeter seemed to sense that, and his dark eyes appraised Neal.

"That's not proper range manners," he said mildly. "Maddox and I just stopped by for a bait of chow. We're hungry. You should welcome us and tell us to step inside."

Jeeter let the breath gust from him suddenly. "Well, Maddox," he said. "We can't wait forever for an invitation. If we're not getting one, let's step inside and help ourselves."

It was crazy. It made no sense. In town, Neal had passed off Jeeter's hoorawing him as just a momentary whim on the gambler's part. But certainly the man didn't ride a dozen hard miles out here

just to carry on that little game.

Jeeter stopped by the stove, just inside the door, lifted one of the round iron lids from the top and looked down at the glowing coals. Neal's rifle was now within reach, but the young rancher knew that Maddox would act even more swiftly with his own two guns if there were any attempt made to grab that rifle.

"What's yore game, Jeeter?" Neal demanded.

"Just after some food." The gambler pointed to a covered pot at the back of the stove. "What's in that, Maddox?"

Maddox took off the lid. "Son-of-a-gun stew, looks like." He tipped his head toward Neal. "Yuh think de guy's a good cook?"

"Son-of-a-gun stew is something hard to ruin," Jeeter answered, showing his even, white teeth. "The only mystery about it is whose beef was it made out of."

In friendly conversation, the remark would have been passed off as a joke. But now it was another attempt at insult. But almost immediately something else had caught the gambler's eye. There were a half dozen photographs Neal had tacked to the wall above his bunk.

"Pictures!" Jeeter said.

"Dames!" Maddox echoed his boss.

JEETER'S dark eyes traveled over them appreciatively. "Nice." He nodded his head. "I'd heard some of the boys in town talk about your collection. Very nice. Wouldn't mind having some of them myself. Like this one of Lil Langtry. You don't mind, do you, Neal?"

And, without waiting for answer, he worked his fingers in behind the picture and ripped it loose, half tearing it as he did.

Lunging forward, Neal drove a looping fist at the gambler's jaw. It landed on the man's chest, driving him back. Jeeter recoiled, his own fists coming up and flailing. A diamond on one of Jeeter's fingers split Neal's lip. The rancher retaliated with a blow that smashed into Jeeter's nose with a crunching sound. Neal was looping in another solid blow when Maddox, coming in from behind, caught his arm.

Shoving backward and extending his foot, the stocky gunman wrestled Neal to the floor, shaking himself loose as Neal fell. Before Neal could recover, the toe of Maddox' boot swung out. It landed just below the ear. Lights blacked out momentarily, and Neal lost the power to get back up.

Shaking his head dazedly, Neal saw Jeeter ripping the other pictures from the wall above the bunk. He was aware that Maddox had loosened his belt with the Mexican silver buckle and was stripping it from him, but he was powerless to stop him. When he finally did stagger up and lurch to the door, he saw Jeeter and Maddox had mounted their horses, and in a shower of rocks, were racing down the slope. He watched them splash across the stream and head back in the direction of Ogallala.

Neal poured some water from a pitcher into a bowl and washed away the blood from his face. When he had dried his face he went to the chest near his bunk and took out his gun and belt.

He strapped it about him. It was a weapon he wore only when riding in rough country where he might need it for killing snakes. He didn't customarily wear a gun for protection for he was not a good shot or fast on the draw.

Five years before, when Neal O'Keefe had been eighteen, he had worn a gun regularly. He felt he needed it to command respect, but it wasn't long before he had learned that it could often be a provocative element and stimulate battles where none need ever have been fought, and that it was not a weapon he could ever use well.

From one such ruckus, Neal had carried away a .45 slug in his shoulder. The pellet had shattered a bone and brought with it infection, and Neal had been desperately ill for more than a year. He had never fully regained either the health or the confidence he had known before that mishap.

From the shed, Neal now brought out his saddle. Despite its unprepossessing looks, Fleet was his regular mount, but the big grain-fed pony had picked up a stone a week before and developed a sore frog that would lame it after a mile or two of riding. The local vet had prescribed several weeks of rest.

So it was on Magic that Neal screwed his kak. Magic already had shown con-

siderable promise as a working horse, though only three years old and a mere beginner. He had a good, slow, ground-covering jog, a nice long stride, and a "coyote" trot.

Riding up on one of the high, rock-covered ridges behind his cabin, Neal dismounted. He had brought along two extra boxes of cartridges, and when he had spent them all he was satisfied that his draw was as awkwardly slow and as full of waste motion as it had ever been, and that his eye for a target was as dull as usual.

Nevertheless, when it was dark, he set out on the trail for Ogallala.

Neal had a notion where Bill Jeeter stayed. He had seen the gambler coming out of the Territory Hotel too often to believe he could be wrong about it. Approaching the room clerk and taking from his pocket an empty envelope with which he had provided himself, Neal ran his tongue along its flap and sealed it, then wrote Bill Jeeter's name boldly across its front.

"I'd like to leave this note here," he said.

"Shore," said the clerk. He took it and promptly filed it in the pigeonhole above the number "214."

Neal noted that the key to 214 was in the box, which verified that Jeeter was out. This was an hour at which he'd usually be plying his tinhorn profession, but Neal realized that there might be exceptions to the rule. Rounding to the back side of the hotel, he climbed the outside stairs to the second floor. There he counted off his paces until he came to Room 214. As he had expected, the room was locked.

Outside again, at the back of the hotel, he tallied a corresponding number of paces and located the window of Jeeter's room. A mirthless smile came to his lips as he wondered if Jeeter had selected that room because a low roof slanted off just below it, offering a quick means of escape if ever he had to depart in a hurry. In any case, it was made to order for Neal's purpose.

Standing in the saddle, he quickly pulled himself up on the low roof. But when he got to the window, he breathed a silent oath.

The window was locked!

ON THE balmy night air, the clink of glasses and the muted murmur of voices carried to him from the Ogallala saloon. A lopsided moon was in the sky, but all was quiet in the alley there behind the hotel. Running his finger along the edges of the pane, he found the putty rotten and crumbling. With his clasp knife he dug away the remaining strips of putty and freed the tiny triangular metal fasteners holding the glass in place. When the glass came free, he placed it carefully on the roof.

Moonlight was clear enough sharply to line the objects in the room. Neal did not have to fire a match to find what he was looking for. Beside the bed there was a dresser and washstand. In addition, there was a comb-back rocker, a pair of straight chairs, an ironbound leather trunk and, in one corner, a curtain partitioned off a small space that was intended as a wardrobe.

Jeeter hadn't bothered to put away either the pictures he had ripped from the wall in Neal's cabin, or the belt. They lay openly on top of the dresser, and suddenly Neal wondered why he had come here to take these things back. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. He had known that Jeeter would realize, as soon as he discovered the things missing, who had taken them and that the next step was up to him. But thinking back over it now, it seemed like a roundabout and pointless way of handling the matter. He wondered why he had ever thought it was any good at all.

Footsteps tramping down the hall drew his nerves taught. He was almost certain it couldn't be Jeeter—but then a key poked into the lock and the doorknob turned.

There was no time to make it to the window and out. He could stay and face Jeeter, but if he were forced to kill the gambler in the present setup it was certain to be called murder. It would look like a plain case of waiting in ambush.

Then the door was opening, and Jeeter was thumbing alight a match to torch the small lamp. Holding his breath, Neal slipped behind the wardrobe curtain.

He did not see the second man who entered the room, but he had only to hear his voice to know it was Maddox. But both men were speaking in low,

guarded tones, so that Neal had to strain to catch what they were saying. He heard the scrape of chairs and then Jeeter's voice.

"It's going to be simple and foolproof," the gambler was saying. I can't figure out the meaning of that empty envelope being in my box. It must be somebody's idea of a joke, but you got nothing to worry about at all. You're going to be in Denver City."

"I know," Maddox said. "But won't Hildreth get wise that it's me and not you who's there?"

"How can he? I'm giving you the list of glassware and other stuff he wants bought for the saloon, and the draft for it. The people in Denver City don't know me personally. And your placing that order there in my name will be my alibi. You want to practise writing my signature some more, so when you sign for the stuff it will be perfect?"

Maddox muttered an answer which Neal could not quite catch. Then Jeeter apparently turned his head, for what he said for the next minute or so was barely distinguishable. All Neal could make out was that Jeeter, apparently, was due to catch the train to Denver City the following day to conduct some business there for Red Hildreth who owned the saloon. However, when the train slowed for Twelve Mile grade, a half hour run beyond Ogallala town, Jeeter was to get off and Maddox would be waiting to get on in his place. The reason for all this deception was never mentioned, but to Neal it was as clear as rain.

Bill Jeeter was planning to pull a robbery.

"Yuh don't think Neal O'Keefe will give yuh any trouble?" Maddox asked then.

"Neal O'Keefe?" Jeeter snorted. "We got that lily-livered son spooked of his shadow. What do you think I buffaloed him like that for. I'm going to run my nag into the ground making it to his place. After I pick up a fresh mount there, I'll never be headed. That horse he calls Magic is a sweet one. The posse will be scattered from tarnation to breakfast trying to pick up my trail in the badlands."

"Ten o'clock tomorrow night then?"

"That's what time I'm setting the clock for."

The wall lamp was suddenly extinguished, feet thudded across the floor and the door closed, the key scraping in the lock. Neal waited briefly, then stepped out of concealment. He considered the possibilities and he knew there was only one thing he could do.

A light was burning in the sheriff's office, but a deputy was holding down the post when Neal stopped there. Sheriff Claude Teitzel was not at his desk.

"Claude?" the deputy said. "Why, he's over to the Ogallala, hoistin' one with the boys."

AS HE pushed into the saloon, Neal remembered that it had been earlier that very same day when he had silently vowed never again to return there. Inside, almost the first person he saw at the bar was Bill Jeeter. But Jeeter did not see him and, quickly, Neal stepped out again. A man loitered against the wall in the shadows.

"Do me a kindness, stranger?" Neal said. "Will yuh step inside and tell the sheriff I'd like to parley with him out here?"

The tall stranger eyed Neal up and down curiously, but nodding his head he stepped inside. A moment later, the sheriff appeared, his hand resting on his gun and his eyes wary. When he saw it was Neal who was waiting for him, some of the tautness went out of his shoulders, but a curling smile came to his lips instead.

"Oh, you!" he exclaimed somewhat contemptuously. "What do you want to see me for?"

Neal drew him out of range of the stranger who had come outside again. Quickly, and as briefly as possible, then, he related what he knew, that Jeeter planned to get off the train at Twelve Mile grade and double back to town to stage a robbery.

"Robbery?" the sheriff snorted. "What's Bill Jeeter goin' to rob?"

"I don't know," Neal O'Keefe admitted frankly. "But it can't be anything else than that."

The lawman's eyes grew hard. "Yuh say there's goin' to be a robbery, and yuh don't even know where there's goin' to be a robbery. What put the blazes in yore neck, O'Keefe? Is this some loco scheme yuh cooked up to get back at Bill Jeeter

because of what happened this morning?"

"It's no loco scheme. It's the truth," Neal insisted.

Claude Teitzel's manner softened. "Okay, son." He clapped Neal on the shoulder placatingly. "Don't you worry. I'll take care of it." And with that, he turned back into the saloon.

Neal hesitated a moment, then sidled up to the window that gave a view of the front barroom. He saw the sheriff walk up to Bill Jeeter. He saw him speak to the gambler, and then he saw them both leaning backward with uproarious laughter. Others gathered around, including some of the girls, and Neal saw the sheriff repeating to them what he obviously had just told Jeeter, and he did it as if he were mimicking Neal's manner, sticking his fingers against his ears to make them stand away from his head.

A slow, angry flush spread up Neal's back and neck to his face, and he turned away quickly so he wouldn't see any more.

Neal O'Keefe didn't sleep well that night. He kept remembering the way they all had laughed at the sheriff's story. He wasn't sure Bill Jeeter would go through with his scheme now, whatever it was, since it had been half revealed, but he had an idea the smooth talking gambler would find some way to turn the situation to his advantage. If he did that, Neal had an idea he was due to figure in whatever Jeeter did.

He spent the next morning riding range, checking on the better than fifty head he had grazing on bluestem. In the afternoon, he went up on the high ridge, once more to practise his draw and his luck at hitting a target.

When dark came, he sat down before his cabin, the gun in his lap. There were only one or two details he had to attend to before ten o'clock. Then he was ready, he felt, for whatever might come. It happened sooner than he expected.

Shortly after nine, a flare of scarlet light mushroomed suddenly in the northern sky. It indicated only one thing—fire. And somehow Neal knew it must be tied in to whatever Jeeter planned. Making a hurried trip back to his horses penned in the corral, Neal made certain that all was in readiness there. Fleet snuffled his hand and Magic trumpeted a friendly greeting. He hunkered down there then in the dark to wait.

The first signal for action he had was the splash of a rider crossing the stream below. The hoofbeats pounded up the slope and within seconds a rider slid to a churning halt no more than a dozen yards from him, and leaped from the saddle. Almost in one motion, the rider uncinched his kak, swung it over his shoulder, and started for the corral gate. He brought up short as Neal, standing spraddle-legged, a gleaming gun in his fist, confronted him.

"Jeeter," Neal said. "So yuh did go ahead with it—"

He broke off at the sudden stab of the gambler's hand. The hand made an upward arc, and flame tongued out. Neal felt something like a fist strike him in the forehead and drive him back, and he was conscious that his fingers were reflexively triggering and that his bullets were digging into the ground. Vaguely, he knew that Jeeter was pumping several more bullets at him. But they weren't necessary. Neal knew he was out of the fight as he slipped to the ground.

MANY a time Neal had seen cowboys who had been in the saddle for twenty-four hours without sleep or anything to eat come into camp, flop down on a log, and go to sleep instantly. They would sleep soundly too with the rain pouring down in their faces and water four inches all around them. He felt like that now. It seemed to him that he'd never wake again.

But then he did awaken, and it was not rain, but a bucket of water that had sloshed in his face. An arm circling his shoulders pulled him up, and he found himself looking in rancher Tom Smith's fat face. A dozen other riders were ranged behind him. Vaguely, Neal recognized Sheriff Claude Teitzel and Red Hildreth, who owned the saloon, among them.

"This is our man," Sheriff Teitzel was saying. "That was his belt buckle and pictures we found near the safe."

"If it is our man," Red Hildreth interjected, "whereat is my twenty thousand in gold coin? You blundering, whiskey-soaked ox, Teitzel. Don't you know that nobody ever got within gun range of the gent we're after, and can't you see this

feller got that crease across his head tryin' to stop the gent we want?"

Neal shook his head dazedly. He put his hand to the deep furrow there, and it wasn't bleeding. Then, at last, he could get the words out.

"Yuh want the man who robbed yore safe, Hildreth? Then keep on followin' the rock trail. A half mile, a mile mebbe. Yuh won't have to go far. You—"

Neal paused. Hoofbeats had suddenly come clearly from the darkness on the other side of the ranchyard clearing. Now they quickly grew louder, in a broken, uneven gait. Out of the darkness the rider appeared, drew up almost to the corral before he saw the posse there. It was too late to turn back then. Saloonman Hildreth's hoarse cry lifted.

"Bill Jeeter!" he shouted. "So it is you —you ornery thievin' dog!"

A tongue of flame lanced from Bill Jeeter's gun, darting toward Hildreth. It was answered promptly, and lead whined in a criss-cross pattern across the yard. It stopped as Bill Jeeter slumped in the saddle, fell and lay motionless on the ground.

Cautiously, guns ready, a half dozen possemen closed in on him then.

"He ain't dead. Only winged," one of them called out.

"But why the devil did he come ridin' back after he was in the clear?" someone asked.

"I think I can answer that," Neal said. He had managed somehow to get to his feet. Now that his first dizziness was gone, he felt that if he could only hang and rattle awhile his strength would come back. "I can tell you why Bill Jeeter rode back."

All eyes turned to him, but he found no trouble finding words, and suddenly he felt the equal of any man to whom he spoke.

"I had two hosses in my corral," Neal said. "I knew Jeeter was planning to take the one called Magic. But the other one —Fleet—got a weakness in a hoof. I wanted to be shore Jeeter would take Fleet, and not Magic, when he came out here tonight to use my place as a way station in picking up a fresh mount, so just before the time I figgered he'd get here, I lathered Magic good—lathered him with a bar of soap."

"So he'd think the hoss had just been rode hard and wouldn't want him?" Sheriff Teitzel added. "Was that the idea?" And when Neal nodded, "But if yuh knew Jeeter was after yore hosses, why didn't yuh just turn them both loose, so he wouldn't have found either one when he got here?"

Some things were hard to explain, and Neal guessed maybe this was like that. "Did yuh ever feel, Sheriff, that somebody was just a mite too smart, had too high an opinion of hisself, and yuh wanted to take him down a notch? Well, that's how I felt. I wanted to rub it in good."

"So this thievin' killer's mount went lame," the sheriff exclaimed, "and he came back here to see if he didn't mebbe still have time to switch again?" He clapped Neal on the back, but this time it was a different sort of clap than the one of the night before.

"Killer, did yuh say?" Neal asked. "Yuh mean Bill Jeeter?"

"Killer is right," the sheriff put in. "Jeeter shot down the hostler at the livery and torched the place. Then when everybody ran to see the fire, he blowed his boss' saloon safe with a charge of black powder on his own sweet time." Teitzel turned to his posse. "Come on, boys. We got to get back to town. We got to send a wire to Denver City so they'll pick up this killer's partner, Maddox, there. And then we got a little celebratin' to do."

Neal had no idea he'd ever go riding back to town that night, but they insisted on it. They claimed the town medico had to look at the groove on his head, and, besides, Hildreth announced that all drinks would be on the house in honor of their guest.

When they got to the Ogallala, Neal felt a bunch of the men grab him. He felt himself being lifted to their shoulders and then they carried him inside and stood him up on the bar.

"Just a minute, boys," a husky voice said then, and it was Muriel.

She pushed her way to the front. They hoisted her up on the bar, and Neal smelled that devastating lilac perfume while, on behalf of Red Hildreth, Muriel presented him with a thousand dollars—all in twenty dollar gold pieces, right out of the stolen money that had been recovered.

Neal didn't know what to say. Then, suddenly, her arms went around him, and before he knew what was happening she was kissing him long and hard, while the thunder of cheers and laughter dinned in his ears that couldn't have been any redder.

"You're the town hero, dearie," she said. "What are you going to do now?"

Neal guessed he might have had a distant look in his eyes right then, for he wasn't thinking of Muriel, or the reward money, or of Bill Jeeter any more. He was thinking of the blond little cutie named Taffy who dished things up at the hash-house. He was thinking that now when he asked her to take that ride with him, he'd have a better than even chance that she wouldn't refuse.

But he also knew that asking her was going to take plenty more nerve than facing six Bill Jeeters with six hideout sleeve guns to boot. Just thinking about it made his ears red.

NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS!

THE FLETCHER KID

A Rangeland Action Novelet

By WALT COBURN

•

THE BOX L GRAB

A Painted Post Novelet

By TOM GUNN

•

and Many Other Stories and Features

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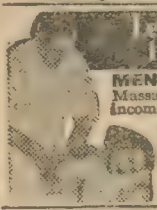

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(Continued from page 9)

down in a lame glide, about a hundred yards off.

I scrambled out of the pit and loped for it. The bird took off in a dodgy run. I unkinked my legs and did my best to get in good gun range. But my best wasn't good enough.

Never Try It!

Well, folks, I'm in a position to advise you never to try to run down a sandhill crane. Him and I—I knew it was a him, because the male sandhill has a red crest that makes you think of a rooster's comb—him and I tore around that sheep pasture, me reloading as I ran, until I was practically tripping over my tongue.

After a considerable waste of ammunition, I succeeded in stopping it.

There's where I learned something else about sandhills. I approached to pick it up and administer final rites. Mister Crane, he had other ideas on that performance. As I reached, he snaked back that long, slender neck and let drive.

The bill of an old he-crane is a weapon about the size and shape of a spearhead, like Indians used to use on buffalo. I bet even a crippled sandhill can drive its bill through a board.

This one drove his only part way into my arm, through the heavy duck canvas sleeve of a hunting coat and woolen shirt. I was plumb ashamed to shoot again. Besides which, at that pointblank range I likely would have blasted it into the next county.

So I whaled out with my gun butt. And there we battled it out. I managed to win the last round. Later on, I was told that a sandhill can peck out the eyes of a hunting dog, real neat. It wouldn't have any trouble doing the same to a man.

A Hard-Won Trophy

That was the hardest won trophy I ever bagged. I slung my prize over a shoulder. As I draggled back to camp, its feet touched the ground. And I'm not strictly a midget.

That was the first and last sandhill crane I ever did get, though I tried many times afterwards, and was most usually successful in getting what I went after. So I can say this with certainty. Hunters didn't kill off the millions—yessir, millions of sandhills that used to make grand symphony under Western skies. It was the gradual destruction of their breeding grounds that did away with them. All but those survivors of the wariest and the gamest of game birds, yonder in eastern Oregon. Far's I'm concerned, they can keep right on surviving. May they multiply and flourish and gladden the eyes and ears of outdoor folks in all the years to come.

Now that we've touched on both fishing and hunting, here is information that concerns a total of 25,974,549 persons, most of whom I hope are followers of this here Home Corral gabfest. As a rule, we don't mess around with statistics, because the figures are either too big to understand or too little to amount to much.

Anyhow, it's just been announced by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service that in the year ending June 30, 1948, 11,391,810 American citizens bought hunting licenses, and 14,582,-739 bought fishing licenses.

Like most phony phiggers, they don't tell how many of us had both fishing and hunting licenses, therefore got counted twice. Also, how come that most government tallying lags a year or more behind time, the present?

A heap of hunters and fishermen complain, when deprived of their chosen sport, by saying:

"Shucks, what else can we interest ourselves in outdoors that offers a little excitement?"

Bee Hunting

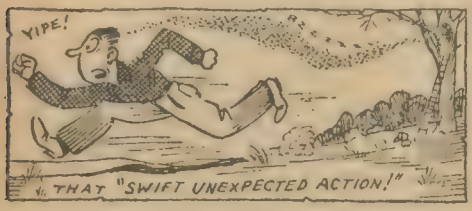
All right, here's one. Ever go bee hunting? Try it sometime, if you crave excitement and some swift, unexpected action. Also, you can spend a lifetime learning and not know all about it. Just for instance, honey is one of the oldest foods known to mankind. But no entomologist that ever lived has been able to explain just how bees manage to make honey out of nectar! Yessir, that's a fact.

Here are some statistics to go with it. There are more than one million beekeepers in this country, and they produce—or their bees do—about 100,000 tons of honey every year.

And that doesn't count the amount of honey that the bees eat themselves. Apiarists

—beekeepers—allow about 500 pounds per year per hive to keep the air lift going.

There you are, hombres and hombresses—the sport of beehunting. You have a good chance to bring back something, besides all the fun you have. Honey, they say, is not only one of the world's oldest foods, honey



more than 3000 years old having been found in Egyptian tombs, but there is none purer. Also, it's the sweetest, almost twice as sweet as the best cane sugar, and comes in thousands of flavors that preserve the fragrance traceable to more than 2000 kinds of flowers.

You don't need any expensive equipment, either such as waders. Unless you get deeper into honey than I ever did. What's more, you don't have to buy a license.

Want to know more about it? We haven't got elbow room to go into it here, now. But you can write to the Supt. of Documents, Washington, D.C., for a bee booklet, for a starter.

Well, folks, it's time to say adios till our trails cross again next issue.

—DOC LONG TRAIL.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

ATENSELY dramatic story of a boy who wanted to follow the owlhoot trails—and was given a chance to do so—is THE FLETCHER KID, the engrossing novelet by Walt Coburn which is featured in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN.

The Fletcher Kid was eighteen years old, and the height of his ambition was to be tough. But when he actually became one of Dutch Jake's horse thief gang, running a bunch of stolen horses out of the country by moonlight, with Dutch Jake riding right alongside him while the Fletcher Kid piloted the horse thief outfit through the broken Larb Hills country, headed for a crossing on the Missouri River, the Fletcher Kid no longer felt brave.

"That Old Man of yourn," Dutch Jake stood in his stirrups at a long trot and he loomed

[*Turn page*]

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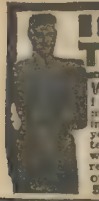

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up big and rawboned and tough alongside the Fletcher Kid, "claims you got a short cut through the Larb Hills. Cuts off ten-twelve miles from the route we always travel that skirts the Hills. Claims nobody but the Indians know about it. So he hired you out to me to pilot us. Claims you can travel it blindfolded by the dark of the moon and make no mistake. There's two hundred head of stolen horses in this cavvy. And half a dozen horse thieves with a bounty on their hides. Including the big price on the hide of Dutch Jake. You better not make any mistake, Kid."

"I know this short cut trail," the Fletcher Kid said.

He did know it—but if he led the horse thieves in the right direction all the way the Fletcher Kid knew that he would place his sister Rose and the young rancher she had married in deadly peril. If Dutch Jake and the others learned he was guiding them wrong it would be death for the Fletcher Kid.

His father, Old Fletch, was a small scale cattle rustler and made bootleg liquor. He was tough, far tougher than his son, but when the old man was caught and taken along with the outlaw band, the Fletcher Kid learned a lot about his parent that he had never known before.

The Fletcher Kid found that any and all of the men with whom he rode through the night would kill him without the slightest sign of emotion if he made one false move. And then they reached the place where the trail forked to the right and to the left. The Kid insisted that they go one way and old Fletch another.

"One of you is lying, and we'll soon find out which one," Dutch Jake said.

The trail they finally followed and what happened then makes THE FLETCHER KID a novelet that is packed with swiftly mounting tension right on through to the very climax!

Sheriff Blue Steele and his deputy, Shorty Watts, again go into action in THE BOX L GRAB, the exciting novelet by Tom Gunn which also appears in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN.

Shorty didn't consider the stranger in Painted Post particularly interesting until the deputy learned the new arrival expected to take over Magpie Stevens' stage line. But when Hutch Hannibal announced that Magpie planned to have a store at Box L Spring,

then Shorty decided this whole thing was something that Sheriff Blue Steele should know about at once.

When the stranger was questioned by the sheriff, Hannibal revealed that his uncle, Julius Weaver, was establishing a settlement at Box L Spring. If the project was successful it could mean that the new town might become a hangout for outlaws—and it could mean the end of Painted Post.

So Sheriff Blue Steele and his deputy went into action. There was no doubt in the sheriff's mind that Julius Weaver was crooked and the whole set-up a land and water-grabbing scheme, but Steele knew that he had to match his wits against that of the other man if he wanted to win. The sheriff realized he just had to be the victor.

It took a keg of liquor that mysteriously emptied while being delivered on Magpie's stage to Box L Spring—and then a wild dash through roaring guns, rock slides and fire—before the citizens of Painted Post had a real chance of winning the fight. The BOX L GRAB is a story of Sheriff Blue Steele and Shorty Watts at their daring, fighting best!

Also in the next issue will be THE DEACON TAKES ACTION, a swift-moving novelet by Bruce Douglas. Those three outlaws, the Deacon and his two partners, Buck Fleming and Pug Eiler, have no doubt there is something radically wrong when they peacefully approach men working with a herd of cattle—and are driven off by rifle fire!

Buck wanted to start fighting right away but the Deacon decided against it. They were headed for a town called Spanish Spur and he was sure they could hardly remain unnoticed in Spanish Spur if they arrived there with guns smoking and dead men scattered along their back trail.

In the town the three outlaws encountered the sheriff, who had a disagreeable disposition and took a dislike to them at first sight. He was suspicious, but actually knew nothing about the three men. Which just suited the Deacon, Pug and Buck. They were wanted men with heavy rewards for their capture and if they were identified it would mean serious trouble for them.

When they stopped in the saloon things really started happening. Pug recognized a pair of gunmen in the place, Killer Dugan and Otto Richter. A pretty girl was serving drinks. A scar-faced man made a grab for her and a fight started. A fight in which the

[*Turn page*]

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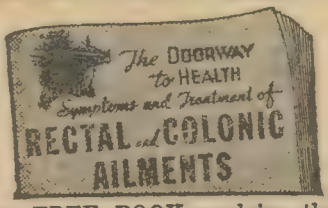

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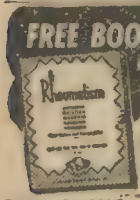

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Deacon, Pug and Buck came to the defense of the girl and a little waddy who had also rushed to her aid. They won the fight and took the girl out of the saloon. George Coryell, the little waddy, came with them.

Coryell had worked on the T P ranch for years. Alice Watson had received a letter from Tom Parmelee, owner of the T P, saying that he was her only living relative and he intended to leave the ranch to her when he died, and her uncle had invited her to come and live at the T P. When Alice arrived she found that Parmelee had sold the ranch and moved to California.

The Deacon decided there was something decidedly suspicious about Tom Parmelee's abrupt departure and about the man named Krug who now apparently owned the T P spread.

The way in which the three outlaws go into action in order to get the ranch for the girl makes THE DEACON TAKES ACTION a story that packs plenty of punch!

There will also be a number of carefully selected shorter Western yarns and interesting features to round out the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN. A fiction feast for everyone!

OUR LETTER BOX

WE ARE always delighted to hear from our readers, and we value your opinions. So why don't you write us? Tell us which stories and authors you like the most, and also about the yarns that didn't appeal to you. We can take a knock as well as a boost, and knowing the likes and dislikes of our readers helps us to prepare future issues to your taste. And now let's take a look at a few of the many letters and postcards we have been receiving:

I have been reading POPULAR WESTERN for a long time and I like the class of Western stories very much. I am 76 years old and have lived in the West for over sixty years and have seen many of the things that make up many of the good stories. However, there is one thing I want to correct in the stories of "Buffalo Billy Bates" by Scott Carleton. In many of his stories he says. "They call Bill Cody 'Long Hair' because of his curly yellow locks." Now I knew Bill personally and his hair was straight and black as a crow and so was his mustache and goatee as anyone that knew him will tell you, but I like the stories anyway.—*W. A. Harris, Rice, Washington.*

Thanks very much for your letter, Mr.

Harris. It is always a special treat to receive a letter from a real old-time Westerner. We are passing along your information about Buffalo Bill Cody to Scott Carleton. As you know, research discloses many differences and opinions on the facts such as these, since Buffalo Bill and his kind have become legends which have various interpretations.

This is the first time I have ever written to the editor of any book, but I cannot keep silent on such a tender and true story as BLAZE FACE by L. P. Holmes which I read in your magazine. In fact I seldom read Westerns and I believe it is the first time I happened to buy POPULAR WESTERN, but I am mighty glad I did. BLAZE FACE brought tears to my eyes. I am an old woman, alone without many friends, no close ones. The story was so true, I would love to have it in book form. It would sell fast. I will get another issue of POPULAR WESTERN and I hope to see another story like that. Kindness wins over all. I thank L. P. Holmes for that wonderful story.—*Hally Dean, Jefferson Hotel, Los Angeles, California.*

We are sure that L. P. Holmes thanks you, as we do, Hally Dean, for your very sweet letter.

I have not been reading POPULAR WESTERN very long, but the issues I have read are very good. One reason I am writing is because of Betty Marshall's letter in which she suggests that you have more romance in the stories. But I like them when there is not so much love interest. So why not have every one with a little romance in it?—*Juaniece McDonald, Newkirk, California.*

You'll find that some of the stories in POPULAR WESTERN have a romantic angle, and others don't, Jauniece. We try to please everyone, and thanks for your letter.

I have always thought the stories in POPULAR WESTERN were good, but they seem to be getting even better all of the time. THE BRAND ARTIST by Walt Coburn, ARMY BLUE IN THEIR BLOOD by Steuart Emery, SOUTH OF COMMAND by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, certainly all were swell yarns. Keep up the good work!—*John Lang, Chicago, Ill.*

Looks like that's all the letters we'll quote from this time—but there'll be others in coming issues and let's hear from more of our readers. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thanks, everybody—see you all next issue!

—THE EDITOR.

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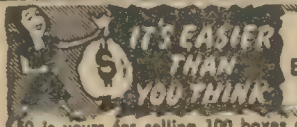

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